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THE EXTRAORDINARY HOUSE

by

ROSITA FORBES

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To

BEATRICE KENT

IN APPRECIATION OF

WIT

COURAGE

KINDNESS

THE EXTRAORDINARY HOUSE

CHAPTER I

AGNES WRAXENDON decided that she'd had enough sea. She stood on the top deck and looked at the muddy waters of the River Plate. They were purplish brown, and where the foam broke it was with the effect of splintered metal. The shore was a line of very white sand, into which the sky slipped without any perceptible pause. In the distance Montevideo displayed the usual features of a port. Behind a tracery of masts and funnels, buildings, bleached by the morning sun, rose detached and characterless. A vast block dominated the quay, and somewhere in the town a sky-scraper swelled into surprising florescence.

At first sight the city gave no intimation of the well-ordered beauty for which it is famous, but Mrs. Wraxendon was used to making quick decisions. She'd intended to cross the Andes and rejoin the liner in Chile. Anything to get away from the crowded desolation of the saloons, where men whose lives were ended and women who'd had no lives worth mentioning discussed the defects of other people's characters, and of their own constitutions. As soon as she'd heard of the landslip on the Trans-Andine, owing to which

passengers would have to stay on board while the ship made the passage of the Straits of Magellan, Agnes had made up her mind that an extra month in such an atmosphere would be intolerable. She'd made up several other people's minds as well, for she was a large, determined woman, who refused to oblige her friends by acknowledging her life ruined. Deprived, by her husband's death, of the country house where she'd spent thirty years entertaining a multitude of friends and generally looking after the neighbourhood, she'd laughed at the idea of lapsing into the convenient London flat indicated by her circumstances, and had set out to see the world. Unfortunately, the cushioned and comfortable cruise, by means of which she'd intended to do so, was not organized for such a purpose. The fifteen hundred passengers, who were robbed of the little identity they possessed as soon as they mounted the gangway, had already been shown the Parliament buildings at Rio. They would subsequently inspect the Congress Hall at Buenos Aires and the penguins on the Falkland Islands, but of the world of men and women, brown, black, yellow, white, struggling out of the Middle Ages towards a post-impressionist conception of modernity, they would see nothing.

Realizing this, while she assisted an ex-governor to forget the exiguity of the future by listening to his accounts of past plenitude, Mrs. Wraxendon had resolved to land at the next port.

Her niece, Jean Langford, was relieved, for being twenty-two and burdened with an inferiority complex, she felt she had no right to be alive among so many ghosts. She'd already confided her impressions of the cruise to young Walwyn, because he, also, was at the beginning, with no scrap-heap of mistakes and mis-

fortunes to scrutinize when the Italian lanterns reddened the Tudor saloon and the band dutifully subdued their conception of Bach to suit protracted virginity and premature dotage.

Tony Walwyn had decided to leave the boat at Montevideo, because he'd heard Uruguay described as the Russia of South America and he erroneously supposed the legacy, which had freed him from a desk in a London stockbroker's office, would go further in a Socialist Republic.

It was not difficult for Mrs. Wraxendon to persuade the Strangs to join her following. Kay was always ready to do anything for which somebody else could be relied upon to pay, and her husband followed where, without emphasizing the fact, she led.

So it happened that five English people of divergent characters and habits, of whom Tony alone was proficient in Spanish, found themselves committed to adventure in the most experimental of South American republics, at that moment enjoying the calm between two storms in the form of a dictatorship leading from the last revolution to the next elections.

Agnes Wraxendon was not content with the municipal hotel. She wanted a house and local colour, with which she was apt to confuse the local inhabitants. There was no lack of either on the beaches, which continued interminably beside a deliciously frilled sea. Orange umbrellas flowered above a carpet-bedding of humanity, sunburned to all shades of bronze and copper. Striped tents were turned into balloons by the flickering wind that raced across the Plate. It tumbled the river into waves, running helter-skelter all over the place, flapping up against each other with a great deal of sneezing and some cross apologies.

There was nothing dignified about the Plate. It was as inconsequent with regard to currents as to colour.

With Jean in attendance, the elderly lady, to whom age meant nothing because she never thought about it, set out to find exactly what she wanted. And within a few hours she'd done so, for the Bank which concerned itself with letting houses sent her ten miles out of the town to a summer village wrapped in bougainvillæa and orange trumpet-flower. Eucalyptus avenues led to the sea. The white houses burst unexpectedly into balconies and porches. Most of these were painted scarlet and the shutters green.

"It can't possibly be real," exclaimed Jean, whose one desire was to escape from as many facts as possible.

"It's got electric light," retorted Agnes, practical and purposeful. They drove through aisle after aisle of gum-trees. The bark was peeling from the trunks. It hung in strips, and, because the inner growth was rose, it suggested tattered wrappings removed from something exquisite and precious. Wind flurried the blue-grey leaves into swift murmurous rustling, so that every tree had a separate life. The avenues were full of speech.

At last, on the outskirts of Carrasco, where the village pulls itself up with a gasp on the edge of the camp, they came to a house which stood apart. It was as white as the others. Its roof was of fluted tiles, faded to the colour of potpourri. The front door kept itself to itself within a porch lined with Moorish tiling. Above it, vermilion railings protected an alcove. There were three bow-windows on the left of the door, and above each of these a balcony with a frilled roof supported by red wooden pillars, so that the whole house was fantastic. It needed only orange-trees in tubs, lanterns

with curly tops and a well faced with majolica to complete the story-book quality. And all these were present.

Jean pinched the oranges to see if they were ripe. Then she noticed the driver looking at her. His expression suggested it was no business of his. With a shrug of the shoulders he emphasized his detachment. None of his compatriots would think of living in the Extraordinary House. They would not so much as go near it after dark if they could possibly avoid it. But the English, of course, were sensible and mad. The dark man, who had Indian and Spanish blood in his veins, saw no contradiction in the terms.

Meanwhile Mrs. Wraxendon had opened the front door with the key provided by the Bank. "The place belongs to a Spanish couple who've gone to Madrid for six months," she said, conscious of a superlative memory. "I'm not sure that I like all this brown."

The ground floor consisted of a hall, with a great chest placed against the side of the stairs, and, on the left, a single room with three windows in one wall and a fourth at the end. The floor was tiled and covered with faded yellow rugs. The walls reflected the colour of beech leaves in October. Jean deliberated as to whether the rough material with which they were hung was brown or gold. Nothing could have been more restful. That was her first impression of the house, but it didn't last long.

As she climbed the stairs behind the large, plastic figure of her aunt, excitement stirred in her. She had the sudden impression that she was hurrying towards the future with arms outstretched, instead of running away from it. Colour burned under her clear brown skin, which merged into the different browns of her

hair. Jean was small and very slight, with hazel eyes always on the defensive and beautifully carved nostrils that seemed to catch up the corners of her mouth. It was a wisp of a mouth with lips so soft and sensitive that they were always a little parted. And this in conjunction with the questing arch of the brows and the tip-tilted hair which held a dozen different colours in its brown, gave the whole face and head an air of expectancy. All Jean's actions were quick and neat like the movements of a bird's wing. She went now without conscious volition from room to room, her breath quickening and all her motions eager, as if she would overtake someone or something that eluded her.

Mrs. Wraxendon called to her from the landing out of which a passage ran the width of the house, with two bedrooms opening on either side and a fifth at the end.

"Look at this bath—it's positively American," said Agnes, who was impressed by plumbing, for in such respect the mansion she'd so long inhabited had been notably deficient.

"You must take the place," said Jean, ignoring the variety of intimate porcelain fittings. "Don't you feel it?"

The house was getting hold of her. It was gently mocking. Already she saw it as a personage, and she felt as if someone stood beside her, girding at her fears and indecisions.

Mrs. Wraxendon, progressing with wide-open eyes from room to room, counted beds and cupboards. She said, "There's everything we need," and felt as if she'd announced a momentous conclusion which would alter the whole course of her life. "My dear, I think

it must be lunch-time," she added in a surprised voice, as she flung open the shutters of a back window. "Oh, how delightful and absurd! Do look."

The garden was enclosed by a high hedge beyond which newly planted eucalyptus quivered like spears held in inexperienced hands. Theirs was the blue of newly polished steel, and they were slim and sharp in the colourless sunshine of a Uruguayan spring. In front of the window stood an arbour covered with roses, but every flower had its place. The floor was of curiously patterned mosaic and in the middle of it was a bright-blue table. There were blue benches in the shade of oleanders and a solitary palm started up like an osprey in an old-fashioned hat. There seemed to Jean to be no shadows, only a clear diffusion of light in which each object had a separate and definite value. A humming-bird quivered in the centre of the whirring disc created by its wings. A hibiscus, heavily scarlet, leaned towards it. "What fun!" said the girl. "But I'm not sure I go with ultra-marine blue. Do you?" She put her head out of the window and immediately the sense of being companioned and directed left her. She wondered what on earth they'd all do in a strange country without knowing a word of the language. But, of course, there was Tony who'd only once been properly abroad, by which she meant out of the more usual Europe, and yet fitted into every situation as if it'd been made for him.

Behind her, Agnes Wraxendon came to a quick decision. The house would've helped her had she needed it. For it was accustomed to the major emotions, and it recognized the quality of the new material at its disposal. It was not an old house, but it had seen violent death and an equally violent love.

It knew enough about life to realize how little it was indispensable.

"I think this is just what we need," said the older woman, unaware that she was giving voice to a conviction.

Shortly afterwards, with her niece on the other side of the table, she was ordering lunch in a mixture of French and English from a waiter who understood neither, while she explained their future to three people who were respectively gratified, disconcerted and amused. Tony Walwyn, translating as inconspicuously as possible his hostesses' assaults upon the menu, decided that a few weeks' delay wouldn't matter, whereas Jean mattered a great deal. On the ship she'd been so oppressed by the alternate futility and finality of her surroundings that it seemed as if she'd no mind of her own on which he could impose his conception of their future relationship. But surely out here, in this clean, invigorating atmosphere, in a country which socially and economically lived years ahead of itself, he could make her take a chance, which to his mind was the only thing worth taking. Tony was tall and golden fair, with strong features and an admirable figure, but he was saved from good looks by the wide irregularity of his mouth that stretched all his expressions from ear to ear. His eyes were grey and deeply set, with claws of fine wrinkles at the corners, because he liked games and played them bareheaded. He'd never been afraid of anything except wasting an opportunity. An experimentalist to the core, he believed in internationalism and all the other things that mass opinion is being drilled to disregard. He loved beauty, whether it stretched across the seasons, or lay close within the covers of a book,

and he liked working with his hands. He meant to get a job in the open, but first of all he meant to get Jean.

George Strang was a man of middle height and middle age, to whom life had administered a hammering without achieving a knock-out blow. He'd served with some distinction in the War. Demobilized at the end of it without apparent chance of a job, he'd made a place for himself in one after another of those indeterminate countries known to the East as dissidently Nationalist and to Europe as mandated. Invariably he did good work. Equally regularly he was deprived of his administrative or advisory position by some change of policy which acted as an epidemic leaving new scars upon already diseased bodies. After two or three years in England, during which he suffered from the general inability of any man, however competent, to find work in a market stocked with an adventitious, adaptable and, above all, new commodity in the shape of women, he accepted the chance offered by a relative's generosity, hoping that in South America conditions would be more favourable. George was brown of hair and skin, with narrow eyes, further protected by glasses. His bones were strong and closely knit. He moved with a certain awkwardness, but he was never tired. He was clever, gallant and disappointed. By this time he'd learned to expect the worst, but he never let it get him down. His one overmastering passion was for his wife. She was the streak of scarlet which ran through the alternating half-tones of his composition. When they were alone together he ceased to be the dry and rather grim man who'd had the reputation in the Middle East of never forgetting friend or enemy.

George Strang hadn't wanted to land in Montevideo. He'd introductions in Argentina, and he felt it was waste of time to linger in the pleasant but unprofitable company of Mrs. Wraxendon. But Kay, who was very nearly beautiful owing to the contrast between her olive skin, lit by enormous brown eyes, and her young, irreverent, blue-white hair, wanted whatever amusement the moment offered. She'd had little enough of it during her years in the Middle East, when she'd acted as housekeeper, secretary and liaison officer to her husband. For his excellent qualities did not include tact and this was greatly needed on the limelit political stage, where each great power in turn tried to assume privileges hotly resisted by the local nationalists. She'd had still less in London where she'd worked all day in a hatshop for the privilege of being able to cook, clean and wash half the night in the series of attics over a city warehouse, out of which she'd contrived, not only a flat, but a home.

"It'll be huge fun to get away from all these frustrated people," she'd said after the invitation had been proffered. "Think of dawdling about in unlimited space. I want to forget there's such a thing as money and the need to earn it. For heaven's sake, let's take all Agnes Wraxendon will give and be thankful."

Kay had smiled, and George, worshipping her person and her courage and even the casual hardness of her which didn't go very deep, agreed that they might as well put in a few weeks in Uruguay. They'd be able to bathe, and, with luck, there might be some horses going.

"So it's all settled," said Mrs. Wraxendon, turning from a last struggle with the waiter. "Such an amusing house, with the end of the world beyond it,

all sandhills and pines and rough grass with fluffy white stuff wobbling about on it. Splendid country for riding."

Agnes had lived with a race-course in the park. She'd entertained royalty whenever it wanted to see a horse win on unfamiliar ground. One or other of these facts had rendered her optimistic, and few people were bold enough to contradict her. For Agnes, kindest of women, was also supremely assured. There had never been anything questionable about her, or her circumstances, or her relationships. She had conferred innumerable benefits but never accepted one, so she was in the enviable position of being able to be natural. She was herself, and on no occasion had she found it necessary to be either less or more. Quiet and simple, but without the least suggestion of placidity, she presided over the table, assuming, as was habitual to her, the rights and duties of a hostess, while her clear and rather pale grey eyes took in all that was happening.

There were good pearls at her throat. Her hair, hesitating between ash-gold and grey, was well arranged under a reasonably smart hat. Her skin was powdered but devoid of colour. It would've been inartistic, and she knew it, to paint the strong and splendid curves of her lips which were still faintly pink. Besides, it was her mind, not her appearance that interested her.

She was accustomed to being surrounded by people and liked them. Looking at Kay, she said : " You're so good at houses. You must help me to make us all comfortable."

Jean, who'd been listening to Tony Walwyn's synthetic views on the politics of the republic, broke in

with "That house won't let you do anything to it. The only question is what it'll do to us!"

At the next table a pleasant-looking Scotch woman leaned across to her companion, who was conspicuously yellow and pink. She said: "D'you know those people have taken the Extraordinary House?"

"It's not possible! They can't be going to live there. Why, I should think someone would tell them. . . ." The flush induced by such unexpected excitement was not becoming to the middle-aged face under the mushroom hat. It was obvious that its owner was anxious to do the telling.

"But what is there that's really known?" interpolated the other.

The two heads drew together. A word escaped and was summarily repressed.

Jean wondered why anyone should be interested in murder on a day so brilliantly alive.

CHAPTER II

IT was one of those rare days when the Plate lay still under a sky darker than the water. The sands were firm, so that motors could drive along them for mile after mile towards Atlantida and all the gay, summer towns strung around the bay. Hundreds of great black and white gulls stood so rigidly, each on one leg, that they looked like heavy-headed flowers planted on the beach. The waves hurried in edged with crystal fringes which broke upon succeeding semi-circles of mother-of-pearl.

Jean in a bathing-dress was lying full length on the edge of the sea. With her elbows dug into the sand and her chin cupped in wet hands, she watched the iridescent curves spreading one beyond the other. Beyond the pallor of the shore the river was streaked with purple and pewter grey, but the earth and air were white with a clarity that seemed to be brittle. Distance had the quality of glass. The girl was so interested in the peculiar effect of a metal sky pressing upon a transparent receptacle in which land and water were imprisoned, that she didn't notice a rider approaching at full gallop. An upstanding bay was almost on top of her before she realized her danger. The horse was out of hand, and his rider, aware of the crowded beaches ahead, was trying to turn him into the sea.

Jean had just time to fling herself out of the way,

rolling sideways into soft sand when the bay plunged past her. Girth-deep in the water he was still attempting to gallop. The girl who rode him, standing up with knees gripping the saddle and her whole weight thrown on the reins, struggled in vain to stop him.

He'll come down, thought Jean, and precipitated herself into the Plate. Half-swimming, she reached for the horse's bridle and hung on to it, for physical fear was unknown to her.

The bay had his head up. He'd got a grip on the bit and his nostrils were wide, but he ceased plunging when he felt a hand on his cheek-bar.

"Thank you so much. He never wants to stop," said a voice that was gently unconcerned.

"But isn't it rather exhausting?" asked Jean, walking out of the sea beside the horse.

"He just runs away. That's all."

The girl on the horse wore a man's striped trousers belted round her waist and tucked into the local boots, wrinkled between calf and ankle. She was bare-headed and unsmiling. So slight she was that she looked a child, but there was a wedding-ring on her small, sunburned hand. She regarded Jean with wide blue eyes, over which her long lashes, with sand glittering on them, cast a faint, dusky shadow. Her face was brown and delicately pointed. "Jeremy's somewhere about," she said.

"Oh, yes," returned Jean, and looked vaguely at the Plate to see if other violent horses were plunging about in it. Then an idea occurred to her, for she'd been brought up in a hunting country. "You didn't take your feet out of the stirrups," she said severely.

"No," said the other. "Is that better? . . ." She gave the impression of using any words that happened

to be lying about, and Jean, accustomed to her aunt's definite speech and to the apposite brilliance of Kay, thought it delicious. They began to talk about horses.

The younger girl turned sideways in her saddle so that her short straight hair, indefinite in colour, was blown from her face and her old shirt, several sizes too big, opened to show a smooth, soft throat with a bloom of fine down on it. "He's never tired and he never gets a sore back," she said, looking at the fir-trees which came down to the edge of the beach.

"Who? Jeremy?" asked Jean, a trifle bewildered, for the conversation had flickered over a number of animals with human names.

"He's my husband," said the exquisitely grave voice, and Jean gave it up.

The next moment a tall, hollow young man rode out of the woods. He was definitely shaped and extremely brown. His smile was engaging, but it was his hands which attracted Jean's attention. In them reins became the strings of a musical instrument and the revenche a bow. The young man took off a battered felt hat, and, since his wife did nothing to explain the situation, Jean felt constrained to do so.

The man's eyes lit. They were full of curiosity and very much alive. "I heard somebody's taken the Extraordinary House, but I didn't believe it," he said.

Jean hesitated. She wanted to ask for explanations, but even out here on the beach with sun and sea united in a crisp clarity which allowed of no reticences, she was aware of something due to the house. It was as if she hesitated to discuss a person whom she already regarded as a benefactor.

"I don't think I should like a ghost," reflected the

equestrian girl, sitting her big horse with the ease of a sparrow on a wire.

The man said sharply : " There isn't any ghost."

" Oh well, there are things . . ." returned his wife, dragging one word after the other and accenting the last.

" Nothing to worry about anyway." The man quieted his fidgety mare with the long sensitive hands that should have held a violin. " We call it the Extraordinary House because of the couple who own it. They're a complete mystery. Nobody ever sees them."

" Yes," said Jean, wondering why he thought it necessary to lie.

Before the couple departed, she learned—from the man—that their name was Ingworth and that they lived on an estancia some miles inland. She watched them cantering along the sands. The bay lengthened his pace, snatching at his bit with a series of plunges in which he swung his body sideways and brought his head sharply in the opposite direction. But the girl remained unmoved. When she was tired of holding him, she loosened the reins and the horse immediately bolted. Jeremy was apparently unconcerned.

Three days later Sally Ingworth, astride a flea-bitten grey, which protested against an unnecessary halt by bouncing gently up and down with the regularity of a rocking-horse, appeared in front of the Extraordinary House—its inmates had by this time adopted the name. " We just came to see if there was anything you wanted . . ." she said to Jean, who was sitting on the wall which, with a sandy road, divided the domain from rolling miles of camp.

" Who's we ? "

Sally looked round. "Well, Jeremy *was* here."

"There's no sign of him now."

"I suppose he's just got lost." Sally stared up at the house which, with the shutters closed, was discreet and non-committal.

"Come in," suggested Jean. "Or rather, come into the garden." She didn't want to share the effect of the house with anyone.

While Sally looped her reins over the gate and pulled up her stirrups, Jeremy came cantering up the track. "Lost my hat," he explained.

"Not yourself. I'm so glad," returned Jean.

The other girl said nothing. Enormous yellow butterflies clashed with the pink of the oleanders. A half-Indian woman, whose broken teeth were irresponsibly splashed with gold, brought tea. She arranged the heavy old-fashioned silver on a low table and waddled away, preceded by the imminence of her fifth child.

Presently the Strangs and Tony came out of the house and there were introductions, followed by mild discussion as to whether they ought to have waited for Mrs. Wraxendon.

"No," said Kay. "She's shopping."

And from that moment everybody noticed Jeremy's behaviour. He sat on the end of the bench, turned sideways so that his back was to the others and stared at Kay. She was particularly vivid in the thin, hard light which frosted her hair, and gave to it the blue brilliance of glaciers. An effective talker, she controlled the conversation as easily as Sally had done the flea-bitten grey. Her mouth, with the upper lip divided by a deep cleft, was a splash of red in the warm darkness of her face.

"Do you ride?" asked Jeremy, with his eyebrows jutting over his eyes and all his face closed upon a secret delight.

"Of course," said Kay, and proceeded to describe a journey through some mountains East of the Mediterranean where she'd been riding a mare and her husband's stallion had made the days hideous until one afternoon while the camp rested both horses had broken loose, and after an interval there was peace. "Until then George couldn't get within a mile of me. While I was scrambling up a cliff by a path, no wider than the strap of your wrist-watch, I used to hear him bucketing about among the boulders hundreds of feet below, with that brute of his screeching like a syren and my heart in my mouth lest the mare should decide to turn round!"

Jeremy smiled and Sally's eyes opened to their fullest extent. "We'll do you better than that," said the man. "What about coming out to the estancia on Thursday?"

"Not Thursday," interposed his wife, who looked less grown-up than ever with vast cotton trousers elaborately rucked up the sides, ballooning over her slim ankles, and bare feet thrust into sandshoes.

"Why not?"

"Well, on Thursday, you know, I have to go and see that Passionate Father who came about the children . . ."

"What!" exclaimed Tony, highly diverted by the delicious small person with eyes the size of saucers. He wanted to make her laugh so that her unpainted lips would open slowly, dusky pink, over the whiteness of her teeth.

But Sally knitted her forehead. "I promised I

would. You know I did." Her drawl was soft as leaves falling. She was rather like a leaf herself.

Jeremy explained : " She means one of the Passionist Fathers who run a school in the town."

" Yes," said Sally, " I must go and see him. He was so kind and so interested in the boys."

" What boys ? " asked Tony. " You haven't got any children, surely ? "

Sally looked surprised. " The boys take care of the horses," she said, as if it were the fullest possible explanation.

Kay went into the house to get hot water, and Jeremy followed her, saying : " Do let me carry it. I say, let me do it, won't you ? "

In the hall, divided from the solitary sitting-room by curtains of some heavy stuff, they paused and looked at each other. The wind which was the breath of the house stirred the hangings. The rings rattled back along the pole and the material swung with them, so that it seemed as if somebody hesitated on the other side with a hand pulling at the curtains. Jeremy glanced at them, startled.

Kay explained : " They always do that. It's rather uncanny, isn't it ? But it's only the draught."

She was conscious of surging vitality. She'd been tired when she left England and depressed on the ship. Her first impression of Montevideo had been of sterilized gaiety. Freedom and equality were measured. The law and the Church held the tapes. Husbands used the scissors. But the moment she entered the house she was conscious of the thrill and stir of movement. She'd always told herself that at thirty-five she'd had enough of experience. All she wanted was security and peace of mind for George. But the house

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made her aware of herself, as she had not been for years. The wind, swelling the hangings on the sitting-room walls and shaking from them the scent and dust of memories, suggested the quickening of a richer and more impetuous life.

Kay, dark as shadows in the forest and white as cotton-grass in the camp, leaned against the post at the bottom of the stairs and asked: "What is there about this place?"

Jeremy, his pulses hammering and the wildest instincts chasing through his brain, said in a husky voice: "There are all sorts of stories, just because, years ago, before any of us were out here, the Uruguayan who built this house disappeared and his wife lived in it with a Spaniard. Not very much to go on."

The clamour of his blood was suffocating. He wanted to take Kay in his arms, to kiss her painted, provocative mouth. God help him! He must be mad. He didn't know the woman. He'd never seen her before.

His revenche, which all the time had been hanging from his wrist, dropped on the floor. The slight noise echoed through the hall. The wind caught it up and flung it against the roof, where it became confused with a creeper tapping against a window and the swirl of the eucalyptus as their ragged branches bent to the pampero. The house was full of sound.

Kay, very still, with the jug steady in her hand, was aware of new vigour in her veins. A force, and with it a savagery that she didn't understand, directed her thoughts. She looked at the whip at her feet and said: "Anything might happen here. I feel it. Something tremendous did happen."

"Perhaps," said Jeremy, holding on to his self-control as if it were a horse.

"I feel that the people who lived here didn't trouble about ordinary standards. They took what they wanted and paid. It must've been a big price." Kay shuddered so that the jug rattled suddenly in her hand, but it was from excitement, not fear.

For a second the woman, who was not usually imaginative, had the amazing impression that she'd been struck with a whip across the shoulder-blades. She could feel the sting of the blow. It was so real that she gasped and swung round to look up the stairs, but there was no one in sight. "It's absurd," she said in a different voice. "But we're all of us affected, in some curious way, by this house, yet none of us want to leave. It's like being tumbled headlong into the middle of a story. We must know the end."

Jeremy pulled out a handkerchief. The palms of his hands were damp and he could feel the sweat on his forehead. Lord, what a fool he'd been about to make of himself! He thought of Sally who was such a good sport, who rode on the carrier of his motor-bicycle and broke his three-year-olds; Sally, who had a way with the worst rogue in the stockyard and enough heart for anything. "You mustn't let it get on your nerves," he said, determinedly commonplace. "I expect it's only the wind. When we've had a Norther for a week there's scarcely two people on speaking terms in the whole of Montevideo."

"What's a Norther?" asked Kay, but she was listening for something else.

"The hot wind that comes from the Equator," replied the man. "It plays the devil with all our nerves. In the camp . . ." he gestured towards the

open country where blue gums and pines contrasted sharply with the whitish green of the grass, scarcely more colourful than the sand to which it was giving way—" the men get out their knives. That's their way of swearing, and we're lucky if we don't have a corpse before the thing blows itself out."

" A corpse ! " said Kay, startled, and wondered why she'd exclaimed, for in those mid-way countries where George had served with more energy than discretion and without any reward at all, corpses were more or less customary, according to their disposition and the number of wounds in their chests. During a revolution, more virulent than usual, a member of the National Assembly had been found hanging from the Strangs' gate-post, which was conveniently high.

" Well, what about this water ? " she said, and then her husband came into the hall.

He smiled pleasantly, but his eyes were not in accord with his lips. He was much shorter than Jeremy, but more compact. " What are you two doing ? " he asked, with an inflection of amusement. " Mrs. Ingworth's been giving us a surprising account of your estancia. It seems all your animals have character."

" Too much," returned Jeremy, aware that he'd been saved from disaster, but he was an obstinate young man, so, with his eyes on Kay, he added : " I hope you've arranged when you're coming out."

" Oh yes, that's all fixed," said George, and took the jug from his wife's hands.

" I'll fill it. Shall I ? " he suggested, and went into the kitchen. He was used to domestic tasks and good at them.

The half-Indian, Lida, was tearing a chicken with strong, coffee-coloured fingers. When these failed she

used her teeth. Subsequently, she arranged the portions in a dish and shook flour over them.

"It doesn't do to watch them at work," said Jeremy, who'd dragged himself out of the hall.

"I should say not," agreed George, taking an instant dislike to the man and upbraiding himself as unreasonable.

Still leaning against the newel-post, Kay, who was used to men's passion, although she was rarely affected by it, and who knew exactly what had happened to Jeremy, smiled as luxuriously as a cat stretching. Feeling the same ease she thought that life was really quite amusing, and for the first time in many years she failed to consider how her plans, forming half-consciously, would affect the welfare, the position and the future of George.

CHAPTER III

MRS. WRAXENDON had bought a car. It was of British make, for Agnes was convinced of the superiority of her own country. England could do no wrong—when she was out of it.

In a Humber-Snipe, therefore, Tony and Jean drove, at a great pace, towards where they imagined the Ingworths' estancia might be. The road was smooth as oil silk. Hedges of mimosa, deliciously inconsequent and just breaking into bloom, bordered vineyards and fields of maize. Eucalyptus caught at the wind with ragged branches and held it, sibilant as scythes in fresh hay. Birds with scarlet crests balanced impudently on the telegraph wires. A scissor-tail flung itself into the air after invisible prey. The first locusts, heralds of the army which was stripping the cattle-camps up-country, whirred against the wind-screen.

"Great. Isn't it?" said Tony.

Jean, in lime-green, with a brown velvet beret pulled over one eyebrow, regarded him with an interest still comparatively impersonal. "You've come alive," she said. "On the boat you were full of intentions, but you didn't really know what they were."

The man protested, "Surely I made them clear enough?"

"With regard to me, yes, although, of course, ship-board sentiment doesn't count; but I didn't feel I knew

much about you, or that you, yourself, knew more. You were a vague and pleasant two yards of something well-shaped and inconspicuously coloured . . ."

"I say!" interpolated Tony.

"But there was no more to you," continued the girl, unmoved.

"And now?"

Jean crumpled her quaint, reserved little face into an expression which she supposed denoted intensity of thought. "I don't know, exactly, but you seem to me to be more . . . well, more effective, I suppose."

"I'm glad of that. Will you marry me?"

"No," said Jean.

"What's the objection?"

"Well, I'm not in love with you. That's good enough, isn't it?"

"Sure?"

"I *was* on the boat. I'm less certain about it now. This sort of country goes to one's head."

She looked at the mud hovels thatched with cane and leaves, or roofed with petrol-tins, that rose mushroom-like amidst patches of gigantic sunflowers. Sometimes a woman in a loose cotton dress, brilliantly red or blue, her hair in a careless plait, her legs wide apart, supporting solidly the swelling curves of her body, stood or sat, with a maté in her hand, sucking the bitter tea through a tube while she stared, expressionless, at nothing.

Towards the Plate the fields gave way to wide, hummocky stretches where sand broke through the coarse yellow grass. Brown-tipped rushes grew wherever there was water. Pines were closely massed and the grey-blue sheen of them repeated the sleek redundant arcuation of the clouds which fell about the

sky in Rubenesque abandon. "The sand is like snow," said Jean, slowly, because she was searching for words. "Look at that drift of cotton-grass. It's Arctic. This is how I imagine the Steppes, colourless and shorn, with fir-trees black against the bleached whiteness of everything else." She was uncomfortable, for the land was putting claws into her.

Tony, driving capably, on the look-out for the mud track which branched off to the estancia, said : "It's jolly good country. I'd like to live here." He was a purposeful young man, so he added : "D'you think you could stand it?"

"No," said Jean. "It's too raw. One would have to be natural here, like Sally, or just crumple up into nothing at all."

She thought it's easy enough to be what passes for natural in London. Clothes and paint make such a difference. Here one would have no sort of armour. She thought of circumstances as upholstery. There was plenty of it in England. The people she knew were comfortably cushioned against life by the conditions with which they surrounded themselves. To attempt to reproduce such a situation in the Uruguayan camp would be to carry hot-water bottles into a desert.

Jean shivered in spite of the warmth. She'd accepted, more or less as a matter of duty, her aunt's invitation to go to South America, although the place seemed to her unnecessarily large, distant and unusual ; but it had not occurred to her that she could like anything so far removed from the narrow circle wherein she'd deliberately sought refuge.

Tony's voice broke into her thoughts. "Uruguay's one of the biggest experiments on the map," he said. "It's the most optimistic socialism I've ever seen. A

worker's paradise, which will shortly be without any work at all, because enterprise is so heavily taxed that it can't make sufficient to pay its labour. You know, I'd like to take a hand. There's a lot of amusement to be got out of this sort of paradox." He glanced ahead, saw that the road was empty, and put an arm round the girl's shoulders. "You'd better come in with me."

Jean twisted herself free. "No," she said sharply. "I hate experiments. All I want is to be left alone, unhurt, unnoticed . . ."

She spoke more vehemently than she'd intended because the man's touch had roused in her feelings which she was determined not to acknowledge. She'd suffered too much. She wasn't coming out into the open. For years, during which she'd imagined herself at the mercy of tongues battening on her mother's reputation, she'd realized there would only be safety in hiding. She'd concealed everything she possibly could, her ideas, her affections and her beliefs. Within herself, she'd secreted the fears and the apprehensions by which her existence was dominated. By refusing to discuss anything personal she'd succeeded in acquiring a reputation for indifference, and the consciousness of this was balm when imaginary slights lashed her hypersensitive spirit.

Tony turned the car into a lane which consisted of enormous ruts with grass and weeds growing between them. "This must be the way," he said, and then: "You won't tell me what's hurt you, but I can see you've had a pretty bad time. Well, I'm here when you want me and I'd be good to you."

Jean smiled at him, a gentle, deprecating little smile that did something to his heart. "I'm waste material," she said, "scrapped because it's not up to standard."

"Rubbish." Tony refused to be disconcerted. He had unlimited sense, which included humour. But he had no idea of money. It meant to him little more than figures on the credit or debit side of an account. On paper he'd seen it made and lost, and the dimensions represented by a series of noughts in a ledger were sometimes so fantastic that money ceased to represent so much coinage or so much purchasing power. It was something with which men gambled, and it had no relation to ordinary life.

Tony was the son of an able-bodied clergyman whose Christianity was decidedly muscular. He'd been taught that to get a pony, which didn't know how, to jump over a fence out hunting was as important as any of the other commandments regulating the traffic of human relationships. At nineteen he'd secured employment on a coffee plantation in Colombia and gone out to it full of enthusiasm. Two years later he'd lost the job because he knocked into 'the day after to-morrow' the Manager who amused himself by ill-treating men and animals. Having worked his passage home in front of the mast on a brigantine by way of islands which produced guano, copra, convicts and other evil-smelling cargoes, he was taken in hand by an agitated relative and confined in an office in Threadneedle Street. After that life seemed to him simple, for it was reduced to the one overmastering intention of escaping as soon as possible.

The Humber-Snipe negotiated ruts with the scorn of a Grand National winner confronted by hurdles. A gate, with the name of the estancia hammered out of the side of a petrol-tin, led into pastures. These were divided by gum-trees and mimosas bent by the pre-

vailing wind. A track wound up and down between outcrops of grey stone. Tussocks of long grass rose above the smooth spaces where cattle grazed. The ground was porous with holes made by small owls. An armadillo, like a sucking-pig in a shell, scuttled out of sight.

" It's good out here," said Tony with complete satisfaction. Jean thought it would be fun to ride full tilt over the great paddocks, but the nakedness of the land held a menace. It hid nothing. Anybody who lived on it would do so at his own risk. A gale would tear from him any fragments of pretence. The sun would beat down on him, pitilessly revealing whatever was discordant to the purpose of trees, grass and sand hillocks, all of which, wind-driven, seemed to be rushing in the same direction.

The estancia was a low, white house, roofed with tiles, with a porch at one end. Its appearance was spoiled by a number of heterogeneous buildings which had hitched themselves on to the main structure. The most offensive of these was a glaring red construction roofed with galvanized iron.

Sally, in a print frock just covering her knees, opened the gate which separated the camp from a patch of grass bordered with flower-beds, whereon a lame horse was tethered. A number of dogs rushed out of the house in her wake, making a flurry of sand round her bare, brown legs which had the same bloom as her throat. Sally smiled over the top bar of the gate, but said nothing. Jean called, " Have you been run away with again? " and then, as she got out of the car, " How are all the horses? " Sally, offering a hand which seemed to have neither weight nor form, so easily it slipped from her visitor's grasp, seemed to be

considering the question. At last she said: "Nobody's ill to-day." She always talked about horses as if they were people.

They crossed the porch which was littered with polo-sticks, wicker-chairs, most of them broken, hens, cats, a sun helmet or two and a native saddle shaped like a tea-tray and covered with sheepskins. Beyond it was a large room with a fireplace at each end. Beside one of these, in a deep chair which had such a cavity in the seat that it was difficult for the occupant to disengage herself from the springs, sat a small, neat woman with an agreeable expression. "Mrs. Jenkins," said Sally as if it were a surprising piece of information, and, having offered cigarettes, she wandered out again among the turmoil of her dogs. Tony followed. He liked being in the open and he wanted to hear about the estancia.

They were scarcely over the threshold before Mrs. Jenkins said: "So you've taken the Extraordinary House?" Her expression was too intelligent for gaping, but her eyes and her mouth certainly widened.

"Yes," said Jean.

"Don't you find it difficult to live there?"

"Why should we?"

"Don't you notice the atmosphere?"

The girl shook her head, but her inquisitor was not to be denied. Julia Jenkins was a woman of character and she had decided opinions. She'd married as her second husband the largest importer in Montevideo, having waited to free herself from the first till her sons were old enough to agree with her judgment of their father. Then, finding herself unable to divorce the wastrel who had lived on her money since he found drinking preferable to any more active occupation, she

went away with Philip Diez Jenkins. And the rumour persisted that, in spite of the fact that they'd been in love with each other for ten years, they'd spent the night of their supposed union playing picquet. In the morning, in order to impress her identity on the chambermaid, already sufficiently surprised by being required to serve breakfast in a bedroom to two people who looked as if they always *had* been and always *would* be fully dressed, the synthetic sinner had had the brilliant idea of smashing a basin.

The outraged husband had secured his divorce. Julia, satisfactorily blameless, had married her Anglo-Uruguayan and lived with him, not only happily but usefully, in spite of the local bishop who roused the hostility of the whole community by forbidding one of its most active members to enter the church.

Julia refused to take the count. There were no more basins to smash, but, by means of a caustic correspondence in which the town delighted, she contrived to dent the prelate's armour. He rescinded his edict, and Julia showed at once her broad-mindedness and her consciousness of virtue by decorating the font for the usual Christian festivals.

Such a woman was not likely to be defeated by Jean's reticence. She meant to know exactly what was happening at the Extraordinary House and the girl would have been no match for her. But before anything had transpired Mrs. Wraxendon, who had driven over with the Strangs and been deserted in favour of the horses, came in search of rest.

" I'd no idea animals were so much more individual than human beings," she said, seating herself on a couch, which she first prodded to be sure that it was as it appeared to be. " Mrs. Ingworth treats horses as if

they were social assets. One expects them to utter, if not witticisms, at least the most profound reflections upon their state."

Agnes Wraxendon was wearing a well-cut shantung coat and skirt which matched the cool creaminess of her skin. Her chin sank gently into the innumerable frills of her blouse. With her round eyes and firm lips, generally slightly parted, she looked alert and capable of dealing with whatever the moment held. Julia decided that here was a great lady, but as she herself was not lacking in quality she returned to the charge. "I'm so anxious to hear how you like the Extraordinary House. We all think it so brave of you to take it."

"Really," said Mrs. Wraxendon, with a faint air of surprise. "But it is an extremely pleasant house." She thought that it had, indeed, been a very satisfactory arrangement. She was not, perhaps, seeing the world as she'd intended, but, during the last few days, she'd begun to wonder whether the world was so well worth seeing as travellers, generally overwrought and under-nourished, suggested from the platforms of learned societies. A deep satisfaction pervaded her being. It was with the memory of a creeper, whose name she'd been unable to discover, pouring off the roof of her balcony, so that the scarlet pillars were wrapped in a still redder bloom, that she replied to Julia's remark about the house having a definite atmosphere. "Don't you think it's always so with houses that are thoroughly lived in? Some people, of course, make no impression at all on the rooms in which they suffer every conceivable emotion. And I suppose the trend of modernity is to be detached from material surroundings. But in old houses I've often

noticed a quality which has nothing to do with the inhabitants."

Jean thought of a room in the country house where she'd lived as isolated as possible from her mother's interests and her mother's friends. In her own mind she'd always called it 'the unhappy room,' because all that had most hurt her had happened within its walls.

Mrs. Jenkins said: "Certainly there are houses which strike one immediately as being happy and others which are, apparently without reason, oppressive. But don't you think there's something more about 'La Casa de Jeta,' [1] as the Uruguayans call it. After all, it's comparatively new. Only one generation has lived in it."

She paused because she wanted to speak about the man who, perhaps, had died in it. But Mrs. Wraxendon took charge of the conversation. In a calm voice, sitting erect and still, she said: "Perhaps they lived very intensely. I imagine life is not a question of movement or even of experience, but of emotional purpose." She thought of all the figures that had passed through her own existence without affecting it, and she continued: "I don't know anything of the story, nor, it seems to me, does anyone else. But since nobody seems to have seen the couple except in the distance, for something like ten years, it follows that their life was lived alone and inside the house. To be content with such an existence they must have been either very stupid or intensely concentrated."

"They were none of them stupid, no, not even the man who's never been heard of since the Duke left the Casino in a hurry late one night, and next day Elena Laretez was, to all intents and purposes, a widow."

[1] The house of bad luck.

"The Duke?" questioned Mrs. Wraxendon, without particular interest. She was thinking of the crowded tapestry of her life. There had been too many threads in it. She wondered why she'd wanted to add others by hurrying round the world—in search of what?

"The man, who calls himself Capacena—your landlord of course—is a Spanish Duke. He has endless names and he doesn't use his title. It was he who married Elena—if they are married and I don't see how they can be as the husband's death was never proved."

Somewhat to her surprise Mrs. Wraxendon found herself saying, "After ten years it is not, perhaps, of great importance." She consoled herself for infringing the precepts of a lifetime by reflecting that it was a new country. Standards could not be expected of a place where well-dressed children with governesses played shuttle-cock in the middle of the streets.

CHAPTER IV

KAY rode with Jeremy and George across the great paddocks behind the estancia. She had a beautiful seat, but she was not always as secure as she looked. Delighted to be on a horse again, she was less concerned with her companions than with her mount, a good-looking chestnut, which arched his neck like a Roman war-horse. They cantered over country that would have been considered impossible in England.

"Give him his head," said Jeremy, "he wants a loose rein."

But Kay liked to feel the chestnut's mouth. She was not used to riding in the Uruguayan fashion. Sitting well forward, her knees gripping the withers, she kept her hands down and the chestnut plunged against the bit. When she tried to stop him he threshed his head round so that, suddenly, there was nothing in front of her.

Neither of the men noticed her predicament. At a hand gallop they crossed ridges and hummocks, hock-deep in grass. Occasionally one of the horses put a foot into an owl-hole and, with a jerk, recovered. Adjusting herself to the chestnut's ideas, in order to avoid his head which he flung into her face at the slightest check, Kay watched Jeremy, riding long, with one hand in the air, and from it the reins hanging loose. It was an ungainly spectacle, but the mare, a

redder chestnut, thoroughbred and nervous, responded to every touch.

The wind was driving the grass in ripples across the camp. It looked as if smooth, yellowish water, stained with rust where reeds grew in the hollows, were being poured over the earth. Kay thought of riding through a tide. She expected to hear it splashing against her horse's legs.

George lost his hat and had to dismount to retrieve it. A handkerchief blew out of his wife's pocket. Jeremy threw himself backwards and bent from the saddle so that for a moment only his leg, hooked against the chestnut's ribs, was visible. At a canter he scooped up the handkerchief and returned it to Kay. "The Cossacks taught us that trick—Sally does it better than me!" He explained: "When they were out here their old general used to come and ride our horses."

The wind reddened George's eyes and brought tears into Kay's, but Jeremy was used to it. His skin was the colour and texture of leather. He was a hard, lean man who looked as if he'd no flesh on his bones. Born in Argentina, of English parents, he'd worked on cattle camps where the land is measured by leagues. He'd ridden fences for months without speaking to a human being. He was used to sleeping in the open with his saddle for a pillow and its sheepskins as a mattress. Asado [1] to him was the best food in the world and he liked a maté, sucked in the dawn round a brushwood fire, surrounded by silent, cloaked figures with knives in their belts and revolvers on their right hips.

He had been to England only once in his life and there he'd met Sally, a waif who'd run away from her

[1] Meat roast in the hide.

august family and was working in a livery stable. One of the first things Jeremy had said to her, because she was so small and slight that it seemed as if a draught might blow her headlong out of the stalls, was " D'you get enough to eat ? "

Sally had answered : " They haven't said anything about paying me yet."

A month later they were engaged. They forgot to tell the girl's relatives for some time. When they did so there was general protest. Sally had fifty pounds a year. Jeremy received an occasional cheque when, in his father's opinion, the price of cattle justified it. " You can't possibly marry," insisted a chorus which included a formidable great-aunt.

" No," said Jeremy gravely. " Not again."

" You see we were married I think last week one day . . ." explained Sally, without punctuation.

The relatives gave it up, all except the great-aunt who wrote firmly to a friend in Uruguay where her husband had once been British Minister.

The result was that Jeremy and Sally were installed, without visible means of support except that which grew, or was bred on the estancia, as managers of an estate whose absentee landlord preferred Buenos Aires, that city of men where women are on sufferance because, to the Porteño, business must be seasoned with passion.

Beyond the paddocks they turned into a wide track fenced with wire. On it the first locusts clung in ragged tassels. " We're in for a bad year of them," explained Jeremy. " When they get going properly we shan't have a blade of grass on the camp."

He looked at Kay with pleasure. Her coat was a masterpiece. It'd been made for her before she was

married, thirteen years ago, but the whipcord had withstood the assaults of climate and circumstance. That coat represented an era of affluence, long forgotten. Her boots were misfits, from which a great name had been stripped, but they retained their air of breeding. Her breeches also had race. She'd bought them second-hand from a friend who hunted in Leicestershire. Kay was clever about clothes.

Jeremy thought she's a damn good-looker, but what the devil happened to me the other day? Yet when, having dismounted to open a fence, he stood with the loose post in his hands and the wire trailing, and Kay's horse sidled against him, so that her knee brushed his shoulder, he felt a swift rush in his blood. He'd known the same sensation in rodeo when he was cutting out a difficult steer, or when he watched a herd break on the pampas. The copper of his cheeks grew darker and his breath quickened.

Kay looked back at him from under lowered lids. The glance was a blade, bared suddenly from its sheath.

George rode adequately, but he was a little stiff. He loped along beside the others, erect and somewhat detached. He was wondering what on earth he'd had against young Ingworth. It must have been a touch of liver, something to do with this infernal wind which got a man on the raw.

His glasses were flecked with sand. Confound the thing! "Does it always blow out here?" he asked, his voice a trifle querulous, but he smiled at his wife, for he was delighted to see her enjoying herself.

"Most of the time," returned Jeremy. "We've three winds and we're more or less used to them, although the Norther's a beast. It picks up all sorts of damp on its way down from the forests and it falls

heavily on us like a soaked blanket. We're unbearable while it lasts. But this is only a Pampero from the South-West. It's blown over the Argentine pampas and it's quite friendly. Sally says it brings us gossip from the big camps and makes fun of our methods which it thinks are parish-pump-parochial ! "

Ingworth liked quoting his wife. He was proud of her, although he didn't notice it.

" And the third wind ? " asked Kay, at ease now on her mount.

" Straight from the South and hideously bleak. Makes one think of Patagonia where it must be an iced razor-blade and of sailing-ships buffeted round the Horn."

" I detest wind," said George, but there was no venom in his speech. He was a kind man, unembittered by the series of misfortunes which had made up his life. He had a fund of quiet good humour and was never quite without hope. In the Middle East he'd seen so many unlikely things happen. Something might come his way.

Talking about the country, they rode between colossal gums, whose leaves were a fury of steel, dripping points of steel, and whose trunks were peeling, so that streamers of bark curled and clapped against the smooth inner sheath, adding to the noise among the branches. Kay said suddenly : " Stillness would be a wound," and while Jeremy looked at her blankly, George understood.

He said : " I can imagine all this sound getting into one's blood so that, at last, one would be continually conscious of it without hearing it at all."

They crossed a road, narrowly avoiding a car, driven at full speed. Jeremy looked after it. " That's

José Fereira," he said. "Nobody else can knock so many miles out of a four-year-old Yank. He's arrested about once a month for exceeding the limit in Montevideo. There's a choice between a pretty heavy fine and a day in prison, so whenever he's convicted, José provides his chauffeur with a couple of bottles of wine and plenty of sausages. And the fellow spends twenty-four hours in gaol, which is much cheaper than a fine."

Kay gasped. "Doesn't the man object?"

"Not at all. Why should he, with a perfectly good chance of getting drunk at his leisure?"

They turned into the wind and rode back towards the estancia. The grass rushed towards them, and above it each fluff of cotton was a shaggy snowflake. George's brown thrust out his neck. He had magnificent bone and his shoulders moved like pistons. Up and down across the hillocks he went, with ears pricked and his great free stride eating up the ground.

Kay was frightened of the holes which were invisible except as patches of sand. She held back the chestnut and Jeremy stayed with her, his mare bucketing sideways, tearing at the bit with head down and her throat-lash touching her chest. Sometimes she flung herself up like a rocket, her nostrils on a level with her rider's face, so that the reins hung straight from her bit, but Jeremy was unmoved. "It's rather like riding a kite," he said. "We call her Lindy because she's always in the air." He attempted to pat the mare's neck, but she whisked away from his hand, presenting her quarters to Kay, leaping over holes and hummocks, sure-footed as a crab.

"It's not very companionable."

"I'm so sorry," said Jeremy over his shoulder. "I'll ride the Camel next time. Nothing disturbs him

and equally, of course, nothing stops him if he really intends to go."

He took it for granted that there would be other rides, for, without thinking about it at all, he was sure that the enigmatic olive woman with the blaze of white hair would mean something to him. He said, "I'll bring some horses down to the beach one day if you'll ride with me," and he had sufficient imagination to visualize the two of them, galloping all out, with the crumble of the waves on their right and seabirds wheeling in front of them. He had a couple of geldings in training and they rode the tests on the sands. Kay would look well on a race-horse. He appreciated her easy grace, unaware of the deficiencies it covered.

"I'd like to," she said and felt all the gaiety and inconsequences to which she'd long been a stranger, tumbling into her hands, from those of the lean, young man whose merriment glinted between thick and dusty lashes. For it was Jeremy's eyes which laughed when he wanted to make a gift of a joke.

Towards them came Tony on the flea-bitten grey, which was too small for him, so that he looked as if he could walk off it. With him was Sally, quaintly breeched, with a blue shirt cut short at the elbows, but she rode, as if it were a toy, a bay three-year-old which shied with the vigour of a shunting engine. In fact, to Kay's appreciative eyes, she didn't ride at all ; she just sat there, not so much *on* the horse as *of* it. She held her reins high, and, apparently without using them, she controlled the bay's illogical dashes. "I think he's cross," she said ; "we met a cart full of rushes and he didn't like it at all," after which she talked to the horse as if he were a relative from whom she had expectations. Her words drifted gently and without par-

ticular connection until she said : " He's taken to stumbling again. He must've had a knock. He swore at me when I felt his pastern."

Tony asked about the crossbred cattle, and then, as the sound of a car furiously driven came to them on the wind, the conversation returned to Fereira.

" He's a character," said Jeremy. " Was accused of sedition—inflammatory speeches against the President, don't you know—and threatened with arrest. He said he'd never be taken alive. With two or three friends he made off in a car. And was held up on the avenida near the big hotel. There was a hell of a fight. One policeman got shot. The others took cover until reinforcements arrived." His sentences were cut short by the antics of Lindy who, with the stables in sight, had fretted herself to a frenzy. Whenever the mare danced round with foam on her bit and sand scuttering from her delicate hoofs, her whole body raging against the now hard-held reins, he continued the story. " Fereira emptied both his revolvers. They laid him out eventually with gas bombs. But he'd put up a good show. His lawyers got him out of prison within the week. He's supposed to be waiting trial, now."

Sally said : " Look where you're going, Benjamin. That's only a sheep. It's not at all different from any other sheep." Narrowly evading the wire towards which the bay shied, she continued : " He's got a mother."

" Who has ? "

" José Enrique."

" What's she like ? " It diverted Kay to make the elf talk. Conversation became as interesting as a jig-saw puzzle.

Sally, who was so little interested in human beings that she had difficulty in seeing them clearly, said : "Oh, well, she's old. He *is* cross with me," and she looked distractedly at Benjamin, who hung his head as if he'd no use for it.

Jeremy explained : "Maria Gonzalez de Fereira is the nearest to royalty we have here. Nobody knows why she's got such a position, but, equally, nobody doubts it. She looks much too old to be anyone's mother, but she's the most superb bit of tradition, arrogant and gracious and all sorts of other opposites. She's never walked a step in the town. I don't believe she's ever been into a shop. Everything comes to her. I've never seen her in a hat. She wears some sort of black cobweb on her head and carries a fan."

George was the most interested. He'd lived in an atmosphere of greatness and missed it.

At the gate which so casually separated what the Ingworths thought of, but did not treat, as a garden, from the tumbled grass of the camp, they pulled up and Jeremy came quickly to Kay, hoping to touch her as she slipped from the saddle, but she threw her leg over and came down on the wrong side. Excitement was bubbling in her and she felt deliciously invigorated, but she'd no intention of giving way to Jeremy.

The brown young man, frustrated, took the reins from her and, leading several horses, went towards the barn which had been divided into mud-walled boxes. His wife was ahead of him. She drooped in her saddle, in sympathy with the obvious dejection of Benjamin. "I can't think why he's so bored . . ." she said. "Perhaps castor-oil—I gave him a bran mash on Saturday."

Jeremy who, for the two years of their married life had felt incomplete unless Sally were within reach, looked at her as if she were scarcely comprehensible. It occurred to him that she was, of course, a separate person.

CHAPTER V

AS the result of a chance meeting at the Carrasco Hotel where Doña Maria had opened a ' beneficencia,' at which a great deal of money was made and a very small proportion found its way to the charity for which it was intended, the mother of José Fereira came to call on Mrs. Wraxendon.

She arrived late one afternoon when the sky was ragged with sunset and flames burned behind the eucalyptus. Dusk drifted through the avenues, and high up under the vaulted branches leaves were dissolving into smoke.

Doña Maria wore black as she had done for the twenty years of her widowhood and for most of the preceding decades, for she belonged to one of those vast and intricate family clans in which someone is always dying, just as someone is always marrying, or giving birth. Her perfectly waved hair was silver against the fragment of ephemeral black which might have been a cap, or the beginning of a veil. She wore enormous grey pearls in her ears and on one hand an emerald set in platinum. Preceded and followed by the formidable curves which constituted her person, without in any way detracting from her personality, she entered the Extraordinary House, and she alone among its visitors did not comment upon the fact that it was let. Instead, she talked to Mrs. Wraxendon, whom she immediately liked, of Uruguay

as she had known it for half a century and more. She spoke of Socialism as a disease for which, in time, a remedy would be discovered. To her family she referred as something primal and eternal. It was obvious that Maria Gonzalez, now of the house of Fereira, was opposed to change.

Agnes Wraxendon found she had much in common with this representative of an order passing with the agricultural wealth from which its power had been derived. Without perceptible pause they ventured into personal reminiscences. The Englishwoman spoke of the house she'd left and of the many houses in England that were tenantless owing to the crisis. The Latin, permitting herself to relax, for her hostess's conversation had convinced her that she was eminently one of the right people, whom it was not only pleasant, but suitable to know, let her glance wander round the room. Darkness gathered outside the circles cast by the shaded lamps. It clung in the folds of the hangings which moved gently against the walls.

"I haven't been in this house for ten years," said Doña Maria. "But nothing has changed."

A sigh drifted between her lips. It was so small a sound for a woman of her proportions. She continued in a dreamy voice, as if she were not quite certain whether she was telling a tale or living it. "I remember so well the night they met. It was at a dinner given by an Argentine to the new President. The occasion was formal, you understand. Elena Laretez wore black lace. No jewels and her shoulders were bare. She had no need to adorn herself. She sat between two men who were dumb, with the long table stretching on either side of her. I can see the

flowers, yellow, purple, violently red, but no redder than Elena's mouth. Beauty such as that is not human."

Doña Maria, whose eyes had seen so much that they no longer expressed anything at all, looked blankly into the past. Her skin was wax, with the surface apparently smooth, that is the sequel to innumerable wrinkles. She continued, very slowly, as if she sought words among a heap of memories. "I sat opposite to her and on my right was the Duke. It was the first time he had seen her. I spoke to him, but he didn't reply. I remember, he had a curious signet on his right hand which lay clenched on the table. It reflected the glow of the wine that, later, was spilled on the table. I can see all the glasses, brimming with colour, and Elena very quiet in her black frock which clung to her body, that marvel of a body which was hers. There has been nothing like it on this earth, thanks to God's mercy."

The old lady, and she was suddenly very old indeed, fumbled inside her bodice for the rosary which was hidden there. "It was at the end of dinner—and it was long, you will understand—that the Duke apologized to me for his lack of conversation. For one moment only he looked at me, and I cannot tell you what was in his eyes. He said to me, in Spanish, naturally, which is the language for such words : 'She is like a prayer at sunset. She is too beautiful. One could not take her, even if she were willing to give herself.' "

The voice, which was without inflections, ebbed into silence. For Maria Gonzalez it was the end of the story. All that had happened afterwards—when the Duke changed his mind—was but the expected outcome of such a passion.

Agnes, a little breathless because she felt as if she also had attended the formal dinner at which every woman except Elena Laretez was blazing in jewels, put her hand on the other's knee, but she said nothing. Nor did she repeat the story to any of her guests.

But the Extraordinary House became to her an intimate friend. When she moved about it she was conscious of aspects at once familiar and original, as the changing expressions on a face of character.

Agnes had imagination. She'd wanted to marry an adventurer, but her parents had decided otherwise. So, for thirty years, she'd been the wife of a prominent landowner, whose passion for trees made him short-sighted with regard to human beings. Agnes had hunted in habits which grew gradually shorter and which showed less and less figure, as Edwardian curves gave way to Georgian planes. She had taken charge of innumerable committees. She had attended private parties at Buckingham Palace and been pleased because there was room to see the pictures. To her great regret she'd had no children, but a number of nephews and nieces had confided in her. She was not easily shocked. There was a vast difference between the standard she demanded of herself and the easier one she expected of other people. Long ago, when she was in the early thirties, there had been a young man, a suitably decorous young man who'd given her a lead across timber and danced with her at hunt balls. They'd stayed in the same country houses, and once, just once, the young man had lost his head. Agnes remembered how profoundly grateful she'd been to him for the emotion she'd been obliged to deny. There had been no possibility of misinterpreting her negative, but she was delighted to have been given the chance of refusing

herself. Her husband took everything for granted and continued to do so until he no longer wanted to take anything at all. Agnes had accepted his habits as she'd accepted the position thrust upon her, but it had never occurred to her that the sequence of people passing through her house constituted life. She'd always had a very clear idea of life, and it was strengthened by her close contacts with the villagers on her husband's estate. She'd kept vigil by more than one cottage bed and watched a crumpled, old face which had never known leisure, privacy or abundance, slip into the dignity and peace of death. And always she'd said to herself: "Some day I'll go away and discover what it's all about." Reading travel books, she'd thought of the sea as a road by which she would reach reality, until at last, well in the middle of the Atlantic, she'd decided there was altogether too much of it.

Uruguay had seemed to her real. It was a new country faced with the most primitive problems rendered sophisticated only by the actions of succeeding governments who wished to achieve the millennium by act of parliament. But in the Extraordinary House she had the feeling that life had very little to do with reality. It was perhaps a quality, irrespective of circumstances.

Agnes, sitting in the alcove at the end of the big sitting-room, with a book on her knee which she never read, watched the curtains swinging in the wind and imagined Elena Laretez pushing them aside. She would walk slowly across the tiled floor. Mrs. Wraxendon saw her as a tall woman, with a glowing skin between peach colour and brown. Her body was a series of splendid curves slipping downwards by shoulder and breast and hip. Her feet were invisible

under her long black skirts. She was slow of gesture and speech because time was at her disposal. In the carriage of her head there was pride and her body had the grace of perfect balance, but she was neither expectant nor ardent. Her beauty was a burden. Agnes thought she must have been glad when at last the Spaniard took it from her, so that other men ceased to fight for it.

One hot afternoon, while Mrs. Wraxendon sat idly on the great brown sofa, with bougainvillæa blowing against the window above her head, and thought of the woman who'd taken refuge in this room, bringing to it or finding in it all she required, Jean came through the garden door which was always open. Agnes, who was devoted to her niece, hoped she would go on, up the narrow stairs beyond the chest which they'd tried in vain to open, thinking that it would be an excellent place for rugs and cushions. But the girl brushed through the curtains and came swiftly across the sitting-room to fling herself into a chair beside her aunt. "It's too hot," she said. "I feel as if I'd been taken to pieces and strewn about the ground."

Mrs. Wraxendon shut her eyes in order to dismiss the gorgeous Elena. When she reopened them she noticed that Jean looked crumpled and tired. She wondered if it was the heat, or Tony Walwyn. Probably the latter, she decided. "What've you been doing?" she asked.

"Oh, just talking," said her niece in an exasperated voice. "It's extraordinary how destructive one can be with words."

Agnes sighed. So they'd been quarrelling again. That was the way of modern lovers. The more they quarrelled, the more certain they were to get married.

"He's very much in love with you," she said, skipping unnecessary introductions.

"Who? What d'you mean?" asked Jean, attempting the defensive, but quickly discarding it. "Well, how can I help it? I've told him I won't marry him. I can't do more."

The girl wore rust-red linen and her tumbled hair reflected its colouring. Her eyes and lips were warm. There was a glow about her which suggested that she'd been satisfactorily kissed. "Of course, he has no money," said Agnes, wondering how such a deficiency would've affected Elena. Really, she must get that improbable woman out of her head.

Jean, deeply sunk into the chair so that her small, pointed chin rested on the bow into which her collar tied, said: "I don't mind being just ordinarily poor, but I must be safe. I can't go through any more uncertainties. All I want is to escape from everything to do with my so-called family, their privileges and their prejudices."

Agnes wondered whether her contemporaries had been so dramatic, but she said in an unruffled voice: "There is nothing to prevent your escaping if you want to."

"Except fear! Fear of everything. You don't know how desperately afraid I am. D'you believe in pre-natal influence?"

"I haven't thought about it very much, but, yes, I dare say I do."

Mrs. Wraxendon remembered her sister-in-law, imperious, haggard and determined. Her thoughts went back over twenty years. At that time Thamar—ridiculous name—had been the wife of a penniless subaltern and in love with Templedown, or covetous of

the position he could give her. Agnes tried to be fair. Her brother had been attractive enough without the glamour of his name. It might be that Thamar, steel-hard and desperate because her looks had no setting, had been in love for those few years during which she'd made havoc of all their lives. In any case, she'd achieved the result she desired. Templedown had overcome the gentle but persistent refusals of his first wife to divorce him. The subaltern had been no match for Thamar. Headlines had screeched across the newspapers, and a family which prided itself on a record as inconspicuous as it was reputable had seen its features and its habits caricatured for the benefit of the public. There had been much bitterness before Thamar had forced her husband's people to recognize her, but what of the woman's feelings during the nine months she'd waited not knowing whether the double divorce would come in time to legitimize her child?

"That's what mother did to me," said Jean, heaping a series of explanations. "Why couldn't she wait? She didn't want me. She's hated me ever since I was old enough to be in her way. I suppose I ought to despise her, but I can't. I'd give anything to be like her. She's safe. Nothing can possibly hurt her because she doesn't feel it."

Agnes was rendered rather breathless by this attack on her principles, for she believed in family loyalty. "I've always looked upon your mother as being particularly gallant," she said.

"She is," retorted Jean. "She's quite fearless. She goes hell for leather for whatever she wants and she doesn't care what happens to anyone else."

Staring moodily in front of her she thought of a pleasant youth, Parliamentary Secretary to her father,

with whom she'd fancied herself in love because they were both negligible in the big household over which Thamar ruled. But it happened that her mother, witty, exquisite, unconquerable, had been short of an admirer. She'd attracted the young Secretary as easily as she choose a hat, and Jean had retired further into the shell which was her protection against the ill-fortune she expected. "Oh, I know I'm being a beast," she said, "but all my life I've been affected by mother's actions. She's infinitely stronger and cleverer, and of course better looking than me, and, when I'm with her, she attracts me so that I've the greatest difficulty in not doing what she wants and it's generally rotten . . ."

"Jean!" protested her aunt.

"Forgive me, darling, but you know perfectly well that to've married Bill Angeleux, whom I detested and whose people are most of them mad, would've been foul, and no amount of money and the rest of it would have made it anything else!"

Mrs. Wraxendon was torn between two loyalties. Eventually, with a flush staining the unpainted ivory of her cheeks, she said: "I'm very glad you didn't marry Lord Angeleux, but there's nothing against Tony . . ."

"Except my cowardice!"

"I think, perhaps, you exaggerate. Besides, if you love him there might be ways . . ." Agnes was attracted by all young people. She wanted them to be happy in their own ways, however odd and disconcerting these might be, and she took a great deal of trouble about them. It was easy for her to give, for she had few needs that money could satisfy. Her mind was already running on an allowance, for her brother was

too heavily burdened by his estate and his wife to be able to provide for his daughter, when Jean said : " You're so hopelessly romantic, darling. I don't suppose I'm in the least in love with him, and anyway one can't live on . . . well, I suppose it would be wind here ! "

A shutter banged in one of the upstair rooms. Mrs. Wraxendon ignored the last part of the sentence. " Don't you know if you're in love with him ? " she asked, practical and puzzled. It seemed to her there was a lot more talk about love these days and far fewer signs of it than when she was young. Love, to her, had been a matter of duty, affection and permanence. It had stood the test of grief, friction and the decorous young man's momentary loss of his head. It had had nothing to do with passion, but, looking back on its not very smooth course, for trees, the destruction of trees and the preservation of trees had overshadowed the attributes more essential to marriage, Agnes considered that it had been eminently worth while. She and her husband had made something of value to themselves and the system of which they were an integral part. She could not see herself as Jean and even Kay did, for she believed in the social and they in the personal equation.

" How can I tell ? " exclaimed her niece, while the wind stirred the green tablecloth and tossed some papers on to the floor. " How can anyone tell ? If it's a desperate affair like Elena's, well then, I suppose there's no doubt. I wonder if she knew at once. They're lucky, those sort of people, because there's no choice for them."

Jean straightened herself. An unusual dignity descended on her. " I acknowledge," she said, " love

might be so big that nothing else mattered at all, but I don't think that sort comes to ordinary people like me." Her voice was low, as she followed the trend of her thoughts. "I'm not even sure that I'd appreciate it. It would be too much like being in prison. Look what it did to the two who lived here. They never went anywhere. This house was their gaoler."

Mrs. Wraxendon said: "D'you know, I have the oddest feeling about Señora Laretez, or I suppose she was really Capacena. They always speak of her as being thoughtless and pliant and swept away by the Spaniard, but I have the impression that she'd gone through a great deal. I never see her as young . . ."

"You see her too!" interrupted Jean.

"Yes. I suppose I do. At least, I imagine her." Mrs. Wraxendon smiled. "How ridiculous we are! Let's talk about you."

"There isn't anything to say."

The shutter banged again and heavy footsteps sounded above them. Both women looked up. "It's only Lida," said Agnes and was surprised at herself, for who else could it have been? Jean looked at her with understanding.

CHAPTER VI

JOSÉ ENRIQUE drove up to the Extraordinary House in an open Packard, with the paint chipped by bullet-marks. It was difficult to reach the gate by road for, after a few storms, the mud-track branching from the avenida was axle-deep in sand. The Uruguayan who, like all his compatriots, was happiest in a crowd, thought it was a strange place to live, but he was not affected by its reputation. The Laretez affair was a back number. It had happened before he became a politician. José Enrique divided his life and the history of Uruguay with the phrase, for he was now the leader of the Altruista party and a Member of the National Assembly. He looked upon himself as a mixture of Napoleon and the Messiah, and hoped that the country did likewise. But in spite of his important preoccupations, for rumour had it that the President contemplated a *coup d'état*, which might prove fatal to his opponents, it was not in the nature of José Enrique to resist a pretty woman.

The Uruguayan had talked to Jean at the 'beneficencia,' and in common politeness he had expressed the admiration which it would've been ill-mannered to hide. She had, of course, the great disadvantage of being a girl, but he'd heard there were no virgins in England and was inclined to give credence to the rumour, since Jean had agreed to lunch with him in the town. He couldn't get her out of his

mind, but it was of her figure he thought, not her face.

He pulled up the Packard with a screech of brakes and sounded the horn until the girl came running out of the house with her fingers pressed to her ears. "Stop that frightful noise!" she called and was surprised at her own indignation so that, having greeted the man in casual fashion, she explained, "The house can't stand noise, you know."

"What do you mean?" asked the Uruguayan, backing the car into a sand-heap and grinding out on a low gear. Jean replied with a generality, but in spite of her distaste for the subject the conversation, directed by José's comment on the isolation of the house, swung into the past.

"What d'you suppose they did here?" asked Jean, considering the number of separate hours contained in ten years.

"They ate, they slept, they bathed in the pool at the bottom of the garden, they made love . . ." returned her companion indifferently.

"Oh!" It was the first time Jean had heard love-making described as a major occupation.

"One must suppose they were obsessed with each other, and under those conditions there are few hours that cannot be spent in bed."

Jean changed the subject, and José acquiesced because it allowed him to talk about himself while he drove at a terrific pace, generally on the wrong side of the road.

"But what *is* your party?" asked the girl, after they'd narrowly missed a mule-cart laden with rushes, and she'd acquired no more than a vague idea that the Altruistas were making so many laws that some of them must eventually be enforced.

José English was not quite sufficient to the task he'd undertaken. "It is very simple," he said. "We're against our own Communists and very much against the Russians. We're against the Catholics and the Landowners and Big Business and the Foreigners." He paused for inspiration.

"Well, what are you *not* against?"

"'Uruguay for the Uruguayans,' that is it," said José Enrique with triumph and drove into a tram. During the resulting argument, in which it seemed the whole population of the suburb took part, so that the Packard was submerged in an odour of garlic and a tide of brown humanity, most of it attired in pyjamas with buttons missing, Jean tried to marshal her ideas of republican politics. It didn't appear to matter which party was in power. For 'reds' and 'whites' were equally prodigal with Socialist legislation. Every law was framed to attract the support of labour, for, hypnotized by the voting strength of the workers, no politician could see the need of any other class of citizen. Tony, she remembered, had described the Utopia desired by Uruguayan free-thinkers as a political corporation supported by labour and financed by heaven, although the latter had already been eliminated as an unprofitable proposition. Meanwhile the country provided an amusing contrast between Latin emotionalism and Soviet standardization.

Jean had time to compare the Englishman with her present companion while the latter posed upon the step of his car and harangued the multitude, promising them, apparently, manna in the form of uneconomic legislation, and totally ignoring the damage which had caused the halt. José Enrique was tall and compara-

tively broad-shouldered. His body narrowed towards the hips. He had a boneless grace which suggested that his muscles, at least, were controlled, but his lips and eyes were undisciplined. Not at all a confidential person, thought Jean, studying the aquiline features which were well cut, but softened by too generous a disposition of flesh. Now Tony, for all his angularities of manner, speech and ideas, was eminently reliable.

With a flash of white teeth and a final magnificent gesture, José dropped back into his seat, ground into third gear, and drove precipitately into the crowd. Jean shut her eyes, for she felt their progress could only be over heaped bodies, but the throng melted before them and in another minute they were tearing into the town.

Montevideo leaped at them with a sudden rush of shops, screeching taxis and advertisements. Beyond the uncompromising rectangles of the business town, where traffic crawled because of the cars parked on either side of the most crowded streets, immense thoroughfares ran straight towards the horizon. Garden walls were heaped with blossom and avenues bordered with planes and acacias. The older houses were one-storeyed and flat-roofed, because, when the first settlers arrived from Argentina two hundred years ago, land was free; but there was an air of space, dignity and order to which the clarity of the atmosphere added an impression of whitewash newly scrubbed. At every corner there seemed to be an ice-cream man with a yellow bucket. Pedlars, flower and fruit stalls, and sellers of bright-coloured drinks emphasized the gaiety of the streets. The restaurants were full of solid citizens in bathing-dresses, for between November and March the population of Montevideo is

amphibian. Portly figures in dressing-gowns of rough towelling strolled under flowering trees. Striped sleeping-suits with nothing to redeem their utility walked about the town, went shopping or drove, with considerable exposure of chest, in small saloon cars. Jean was delighted with a family in particularly blatant pink, from which they surged in curves and the first stages of sunburn, so that she thought of lobsters swelling out of their shells.

José Enrique stopped with his usual violence in front of an open-fronted café which advertised fish meals. "Since you want to see what is specially of the country," he said, "we will lunch here."

They went into a room with a tiled floor, and from every side came the clatter of ill-used cutlery and plates. Jean wondered how so much sound could be compressed into such a limited space. It seemed to her that every variety of noise from the scapel-sharp screeching of children to the blare of tinned opera issuing from the kitchen and the ceaseless confusion of footsteps was trammelled within the reverberating hide of a drum. She could only gesture in acknowledgment of José Enrique's suggestions, so that she presently found herself eating shell-fish with a skewer, while pancakes stuffed with strongly scented herbs, steamed under a thick cheese sauce.

Her companion was unmoved by the clamour. His rounded accents pierced it without difficulty. "Tell me," he said, "are you interested in love?" He spoke as if it were a question of post-impressionist art, or recondite literature.

Jean, whose throat was sore from shouting, contrived to pitch her voice under the general level. "I've never thought about it."

"That is so strange about you English. You think more about horses than love, but you cannot spend the whole day in the saddle. How do you occupy your leisure?"

"Games," said Jean weakly. It was quite impossible to hiss psychological information under the barrage of sound which assailed them.

José shrugged contemptuous shoulders. "Sport is not life," he said. "What is there to it but winning? And after that love is more necessary than ever." His brown eyes were deep and the whites translucent. They seemed to be swimming in some fiery liquid.

Jean was mildly amused. She said: "We don't bother particularly about winning."

"Why then do you play?" asked the Uruguayan, astounded.

"Oh, exercise, I suppose."

The girl speared a long yellow crustacean and looked at it to be sure it wasn't going to wriggle, while José Enrique exclaimed: "And what better exercise could you have than love?" He leaned forward laughing, so that a good deal of dusky red gum was displayed.

Jean thought his appearance aggressively animal, but the conversation was a joke. She wondered how far he'd go. In Uruguay sex was evidently a habit and reproduction a career. The women considered themselves unnatural if they had less than a dozen children. Jean thought of certain exotic creatures she'd seen on the beaches. Even she knew that they didn't represent the race. But they were sleek, lazy and amusing, with well-shaped breasts and heavy lips. They did nothing that could possibly be avoided and preferred horizontal to vertical occupations. They spent three-quarters of their lives undressed. When at

noon they struggled into their clothes it was to discard them within a few hours for uxorious diversions. Cocktail parties began at nine and continued in moonlight. Dinner might be at any hour after ten. While they retained their looks, Uruguayan society limited the night, so far as sleeping was concerned, to the period between dawn and midday.

Jean thought in a detached fashion, there must be more in sex than we imagine ; and she remembered a pretty Frenchwoman leaning out of the window of an English country house to watch a new arrival. The rest of the party were playing tennis which seemed to the Latin a futile occupation for adults. "Is it a man ?" she exclaimed, watching grey tweeds emerge from the limousine and then as golf-clubs and rackets appeared, "Ah, no—what a disaster ! It is only another sportsman."

The Uruguayan followed up what he felt was an advantage. "In love there is place for the imagination and for the muscles too." He doubled an arm so that curves swelled beneath the thin sleeve.

With his eyes on Jean, mocking and appraising her, he wondered what effect he was making. The girl was attractive. It would be amusing to kiss her quaint, deeply cleft mouth. He imagined her breasts small and pointed. He thought of the lines suggested by her tightly-fitting skirt. But it was evident the girl was inexperienced. Perhaps he'd been misinformed about England, but how could one tell with these young females who allowed men to talk to them as if they were already married !

José Enrique's mind wandered to the house he'd just taken because it was suited to a politician of the most serious views. In it were more beds than were strictly

necessary. The largest of these had bars, and he was apt to point it out to his friends as ' reserved for the gymnastics.' José's tongue flicked out along his lips. He said to Jean : " You have not answered my first question, for, if you have not yet thought about love, it is already time that you should do so."

The girl's brows puckered. She forgot the overcrowded café, in which she seemed to be pressed against José Enrique so that even though he made no effort to touch her, she felt there was nothing between them but a wilting pancake and some cockle-shells. She thought of the complications of her life, each one immaterial in itself, but formidable when piled together as an obstruction to her progress. She would've liked to stride freely with the wind in her face. Instead of which she stumbled over the results of other people's actions. She disliked secrecy and her pride was wounded by the necessity for prevarication. Yet, for as long as she could remember, she'd been burdened by a secret, and the weight of it increased with every miserable thought she gave it.

" There are so many more important things than love," she said with impatience, and because, for the moment, she'd been oblivious of her companion, she was startled by his voice exclaiming hotly, " *Por Dios !* Are you a woman at all ? What, if you please, is so important that you grow old without a husband ? "

His amazement was so sincere that Jean, feeling she owed something to her host, and encouraged also by a childish delight in pricking balloons, proffered explanation in the terms affected by her contemporaries in London.

" Friendship ! " exploded the Uruguayan. " What a tale is that ! For if a man wants friendship does he

seek it among the pillows, when he can get it from his companions on the camp or in the club? What has a woman to do with work, unless she is so ill-favoured she can find no man to work for her? Equality! Would you then be another animal under the yoke? You talk like a peasant, bound to labour, yet, even she has the solace of her man's arms in the dusk."

José Enrique was voicing the ideas of his race and class, for whom woman is at all times a possession and, for the duration of her youth, a luxury.

Jean, who had thought herself sophisticated, was annoyed at being told she talked like a campesina. She was also rather overwhelmed by the Uruguayan's eloquence. Accustomed to opinions rather than convictions she took refuge in generalities. Love didn't last; work did and so on, until José Enrique leaned across to her and asked, "Have you ever tried love?"

"No, of course not. We don't go in for that sort of thing in England," retorted Jean, too much on the defensive to be aware of her pomposity.

The Uruguayan threw back his head. His full-throated laughter rolled about the room, but it drew no glances from the other tables, where everybody was too busy eating and trying to talk at the same time to notice even the Napoleonic Messiah. "If you haven't tried it," said the man, between gusts of merriment, "how can you possibly know whether it is important or not?"

CHAPTER VII

KAY had been riding with Jeremy Ingworth. Without consultation they'd planned to be alone, but at the last moment so many people had decided to come too that it was a cavalcade which started along the sands and kept always within sight and generally within hearing of each other. The two who had originated the project fell behind with the idea of talking instead of exchanging meaningless sallies, but Michael, never a dashing rider and accustomed to being near his wife, kept them company. He talked sensibly about politics and farming till Jeremy could've hit him on the head and Kay was conscious of every nerve in her body.

She rode slowly, without speaking, arming herself against the flat tones of her husband's voice by thinking about Jeremy. He was quite an ordinary young man. She couldn't deny that. No horse could get him off, but he had an awkward seat. The nice thing about him was his brownness. It was so smooth and uniform. Skin and hair were equally dark, but the eyes were several shades lighter, an arresting colour that held in it flame and peat and amber, with the clear reflection of water. Kay looked at the man's hands and shivered. His mouth was just good-natured, which was odd because hands and lips are kin, but those long, sensitive fingers must be instinct with knowledge.

Deliberately Kay turned her thoughts to her husband. For years she'd given him full measure. He'd come to her with one trouble after another and she'd listened. She could see herself in so many different rooms, furnished with the same motley collection of good and bad, gathered piecemeal from the bazaars of Middle Eastern cities, listening to the record of ministerial duplicity. There'd generally been something bright on the walls, a scarf hand-woven, or a strip of the local embroidery. There'd always been dogs. They'd pervaded the furniture and the most important decisions of her life had been taken with some sort of hound sprawling over her feet, or twisting round in search of fleas. There had been men too, offering horses, suppers, whatever amusement offered, in the hope of recompense or just because they were lovely and found in the surprising woman with white hair a stimulus instead of an opiate. But Kay would have none of them.

There had been moments when ambition had added excitement to her life, but it was always centred round George. For his sake she had kept her head when the only interesting person in an isolated capital—and he happened to be the king—had incited her to all kinds of indiscretion. There'd never been any question about her heart.

The daughter of yeoman farmers with shrewd eyes for a beast, she'd been brought up in an atmosphere compounded of religion and stock-breeding. Trained to earn her own living, she had early evinced a surprising talent for doing so, for not content with the books of her father's largish establishment, she'd secured the post of secretary to the local member. When she'd learned all she could from him, she'd displayed suffi-

cient tact to induce a letter of introduction to a city magnate, in whose office she'd spent profitable years. A visiting High Commissioner had then secured her services and they'd been so valuable that he took her back with him to the Dominion he worthily represented. There she'd met George, vaguely attached to Government House, and married him because, by this time, she was used to looking after men and George obviously had more need of her than anyone else. After their brief honeymoon, which was pleasant without being exciting, Kay had exerted herself to procure for her husband a post more suited to the talents she was sure he possessed, with the result that they'd moved to those countries, geographical anomalies which represent the blank spaces between Foreign and Colonial Departments.

Considering her life from the point of vantage represented by Jeremy's best chestnut and Jeremy's possible devotion, Kay was inclined to think she'd made the most of it for George, but hadn't got very much out of it herself. And now she was thirty-five—a turning-point surely.

Kay had too much sense of humour to contemplate a grand passion, but a certain amount of relaxation was perhaps her due. She glanced at Jeremy and found him watching her across the tidy figure of her husband. She lowered her eyes, but not before they'd answered the appeal which intensified every line of the man's face. They'd met half a dozen times since that first ride across the paddocks and they'd said very little, because if there were not other people actually present they'd always had the feeling that they might be interrupted. Once or twice Kay had felt, without seeing, that Sally's wide eyes were fixed on her in troubled speculation.

But she'd done nothing. She hadn't even given rein to the impulses charging her body with a new vitality. She'd waited and at last opportunity had offered, with the ride which was to take them far along the sands, beyond reach of observation, so that they could dismount and tether their horses in a eucalyptus wood with the scent of the trees for incense and the scuffling murmur of them a ritual. But Sally had intervened. Yes, it was Sally who'd incited the others, so that George had said he wanted a spot of exercise and Jean had asked if she could try the bay whose headlong gallops ended in the sea.

Kay felt Jeremy's eyes on her and the heat of them burned into her flesh. Her breath came sharply and she was conscious of physical pain. She wouldn't look at him. What was the use? Each knew what the other was thinking. The chestnut, at the top of his form, shied from an upturned boat. He knew quite well what it was, but the sliding scutter of sand from his hoofs was amusing and he hadn't his usual bit. Kay rocked in her saddle, recovered by clutching the front of it and met Jeremy's smile which told her she was cherished and safe and admired. Her eyes responded and, suddenly, there was something between them, something so strong that George, jogging unconcerned through soft sand, must surely be aware of it.

Kay looked at him, bewildered, and then she stared at the River Plate which was tumbling over itself in a spluttering and ineffective fashion. The sky was a clear and characterless blue. The clouds were ribbons and the breeze flicked gently at the pines bent by stronger winds. There was nothing unusual in the scene, but everything about it had acquired

different values, for it had become intimately connected with a moment of revelation. Kay, stealing another glance at Jeremy, saw him in profile with lips set, but it was as if the hand which held his reins caressed her. The blood stormed into her cheeks. Her eyes blazed. She watched, as if from a different dimension, the heedless people in front of her. It was impossible that they shouldn't know what was happening.

After that the ride seemed endless. Jean, unable to hold the bay, was always well ahead. Tony, who had at first been anxious about her, pursued her at as measured a pace as Lindy's frenzy of indignation would allow. Sally, riding a young thoroughbred, the nearest approach to a triangle since bone was apparently confined to the quarters and the rest sloped precipitately towards a ewe neck, wandered about by herself. She was strangely dressed and her saddle was too big for the Waif which drooped mournfully towards the sand, until summoning a sudden and surprising energy, he engaged in a series of bucks during which all that was visible of him were four stiffened legs supporting a hump. On the apex of this sat Sally, quite undisturbed. "I think he's got indigestion," she drawled, when her mount untucked his head from his belly and settled into the slowest possible amble. "He won't say anything about it, but I shouldn't be surprised if he had a pain."

"I should've had several if he'd done that with me," said Kay.

Sally looked surprised. "I do fall off," she said, "quite often. Sometimes it's the easiest thing to do."

"Don't you get hurt?"

"Oh no. Why should I?"

When Jean had been retrieved from the horizon they turned inland. Sandhills surged in front of them. Small, busy firs cushioned the hollows. Jean thought they looked like cats. In the dusk, they were tabby-coated. She stroked one surreptitiously with her whip and out of it blundered an owl. The chestnut reared and the Ingworths called instructions. "Drop the reins! Hit him on the head—the knob-end of the revenche!"

After this the lie of the land was such that they rode for the most part in single file, following narrow tracks between the trees. Jean and Tony drew together. Subsequently they succeeded in losing themselves, and Sally, accompanied by George whose good-nature always made him the victim of such circumstances, went to look for them. There was a good deal of shouting in the plantations.

Jeremy and Kay rode on. Colour slowly withdrew from the land. Grazing cattle were thicker shadows in the dusk. Sunset submerged the horizon in a tide of scarlet. In front of it the eucalyptus woods was a reef. The burning clouds formed into waves and heaped themselves against the barrier. As the wind shaped their crests they reared above it and broke in glittering foam.

The horses, feeling grass under their hoofs, quickened their pace. Kay, gripping the saddle until her thighs ached, for the chestnut slipped into holes and recovered himself with a snort as if to protest against such interference with his pleasure, thought of all the things she might, at last, say, and said nothing at all. For it seemed to her that her thoughts were losing shape with the country that rushed towards her. She

could no longer see the texture or the pattern of the landscape. Darkness rose out of the grass. It swept up to her girths and the withers of her horse, so that she rode blind, with burned stumps or fallen trees appearing suddenly out of the gloom and receding as quickly. A bat flickered across her vision, focusing it, and when she looked down again between the pricked ears of her chestnut the darkness was a swell. Out of it hillocks swept towards her like fishing-boats in full sail. Wind rippled the grass so that the surface of it rose and subsided in long billows. To Kay it was all unreal. She held the reins loose, because the chestnut plunged when he felt the touch of the native bit. It had an open port so that he could get his tongue over it, but the weight of it was a sheet-anchor.

Jeremy also was silent. It was enough for him that he was with Kay in open country, protected by the darkness from the others who impinged upon their solitude. He wanted to touch her, but he was shy. She seemed to him cool, detached and remote. He wondered how he could make opportunity, but because he wasn't used to doing so, all the simple pretexts that he considered seemed to him crude. He could stop to tighten his girths or to fumble with the martingale which was certainly loose, but such affectations would be unworthy of Kay. Without speaking, except for an occasional warning on the man's part when a hole from which a tree had been uprooted gaped in front of them, they cantered on. Once the chestnut shied from a broken fir that looked like a dead horse and Jeremy said, "Well ridden."

Kay didn't answer, but the tune of their blood was the same. It was hammering in their veins, keeping

time to their horses' hoofs, and as the more solid darkness of short paddocks sped towards them, it rose to a crescendo of exhilaration. The woman thought, if I never have another moment like this in all my life, it's been worth while. Thank heavens, I know when I'm happy. I can take hold of happiness and feel it. I'm not like those fools who let all the most exquisite minutes slip away from them without knowing their worth till long afterwards. And in her mind there was a clear idea of all that had happened.

Jeremy was thinking, by George it's jolly good. She's a damn fine rider. I must have her in my arms, somehow. Does she want me at all? Careful now, there's some wire here. He pulled up, calling to Kay, and for a moment she swung against him, so that their stirrups touched. He reached for her hand and his fingers closed on her arm. The touch of her sent the thrill of charged wires through his body.

The chestnut sidled sideways and Jeremy relaxed his hold. Kay said: "On a night like this I'm full of wants, but I don't know what they are." And she was sincere, for the ache in her was too big to mean only Jeremy. It seemed to her that as the last lingering warmth faded from the horizon something withdrew from her grasp. When she left this country with its strength of wind and open spaces, she would leave part of herself behind. Sorrow nagged at her like the beginning of physical pain and she drew deep breaths, standing up in her stirrups. "D'you realize how lucky you are to have all this whenever you like?" she said, her nostrils widening to catch the sweet scent of gums. An orchestra of cicalas accompanied the

tumult of her desires and regrets. Their metallic chirruping was so insistent that at last she didn't know whether it was inside her head or not. Fireflies burned among the grass. Their lights swung upwards, blinking like hurricane lanterns as the insects drifted from stalk to stalk.

Jeremy thought, I only want you and it's pretty damnable, but he said : " I suppose one gets used to it."

Then, as an irresistible impulse drove them together and instinctively their hands reached towards each other, there was the thud of hoofs behind them and Tony, imitating the accents of a telephone girl— " Sorr-rry you've been troubled ! Or perhaps you haven't ! We're all intact anyway."

The two who were so intolerably conscious of each other that every word they uttered had a special and a dangerous significance, drew apart and talked when they couldn't avoid it and generally tried to behave as if nothing unusual had happened to them.

Light streamed from the doorway of a mud shanty surrounded by overgrown vegetables. " Oh, look at those two dogs copying each other ! " said Sally and she turned in her saddle to observe the recumbent lurchers, each with a black patch over the left eye, decoratively curved, nose to tail, in the position of china dogs upon a mantelpiece.

Bare-footed children stumbled along the fence, with shrill, persistent cries. " Stop then, Juanita ! " or " Come on now, Rosita ! "

A yellow mongrel with a catapult of a body and no visible legs, hurtled out of a hibiscus hedge and made for the Waif's near fore. Sally doubled

neatly from the saddle and frustrated it with a mild but well-directed blow. "That's the gargoyle," she said, unfolding again. "We think he was miraculously conceived because he's like nothing else on earth."

A few minutes later they were approaching the Extraordinary House. Seen, thus, in the dark, it was forlorn or forbidding according to the imagination. Only its curved roofs appeared above the hedge which was as solid as a wall. A gigantic willow tossed its branches at one corner of the enclosure. Kay thought of plumes on a hearse. Tony wondered why they'd put the swimming-pool so near it. The water was always full of leaves.

Peons ran out of the shadows, but it was noticeable that they'd waited as far away from the house as possible. They went straight to their patrons, ignoring the strangers and asking familiarly about the horses as Jeremy and Sally dismounted. George, whose attitude towards animals was part of the routine which made up his life, started to loosen his girths and the brown promptly put back his ears and snatched at his shoulder. "Woa then!" said George, turning to pat the viciously arched neck. The brown took full advantage of the opportunity and George stumbled backwards as teeth ripped his chest. Sally caught the reins he dropped. "The brute's bitten me!" said the man, his voice rocketing upwards.

The others gathered round him. His shirt was torn and underneath it was a smudged red mark. Kay, feeling as if the whole world were falling on top of her, so much did she resent the endless pressure of people and circumstances, said briskly, "Iodine's the thing," and took his arm to lead him into the house. The

others followed in a group. Behind them drifted Sally's voice, as expressionless as usual, "He must've taken a dislike to Mr. Strang. It's very odd. He's generally such a kind person."

CHAPTER VIII

IN the brown sitting-room, Mrs. Wraxendon was entertaining visitors. A cocktail-shaker, suitably frosted, occupied the low table on which books were generally piled. In the deepest arm-chair sat Julia Jenkins, smooth, dark and capable. She was smoking through a twelve-inch scarlet holder, her only affectation and a concession to the foreignness of which she was continuously conscious in Uruguay. Opposite her was a good-looking woman with masses of fair hair wound into loose coils on her neck and a figure best described as threatening. Agnes introduced her in a murmur from which the word 'tetanus' seemed to emerge.

"Tetiopoulos," said Julia firmly.

"Yes, of course. I'm so stupid about names," said Mrs. Wraxendon, who never forgot anything that she wished to remember.

Conversation became general and disjointed. Kay had gone upstairs with her husband, so, for Jeremy, the room was empty. While he strained his ears to follow what was happening on the next floor, he gravitated towards Jean. She asked him at once about the red and white Rubenesque woman who looked extremely attractive, lolling against the cushions she'd piled at one end of the sofa.

"Oh, she used to be a bit of a beauty," said Jeremy vaguely, wondering if Kay felt equally frustrated.

Then it occurred to him that, if he didn't talk, he'd probably go mad, so he plunged into words as if they were the healing waters of Jordan. "She's got a tongue like a belaying-pin and she'd do just about as much damage with it if she ever got anything straight, but she's always on the wrong tack, so she's not bad fun if you egg her on."

"She's very decorative," said Jean.

"And means to be. See that hair of hers? She uses it as a red lamp. We always know when there's a cruiser in, for sure as to-morrow there'll be Meggie drying her hair on the balcony, with the whole lot of it tumbling down to excite the ward-room out on the loose."

"Cat!" said Jean.

"Yes, aren't I? Such fun!" Jeremy was not in the least like himself. He went on talking without any particular idea of what he said. All he wanted was to be left in peace to listen, and he could do so comfortably under cover of this sort of rubbish.

"Well, what else have you against her? Let me know the worst," encouraged Jean.

"Oh, not much. Her husband's a slippery sort—Greek, I believe—who seems to think if you do him a favour, he's got a claim on you for ever. I don't know if it's her fault, but they're the kind who return the hospitality they've received one week by asking for more the next."

"In fact," said Jean, "their gratitude is limited to an expectation of further benefits to come."

"Exactly, but I must say they've put over a slick trick with their car. It's a new one and they've never paid any duty. They just hop about between here

and Argentina, six months in each place on a *transit visa*."

"Has she turned you down?" asked Jean with malice, and Jeremy laughed, "Not yet. I still have hopes." His attention was so concentrated that he felt as if his ears were wired to the floor above.

"Small cheats *are* rather a bore," said Jean, regarding the redundant beauty with disfavour, "but of course I'm all for highwaymen, aren't you?"

"Yes," returned Jeremy with fervour. He was sure that Kay's footsteps were approaching the top of the stairs.

Jean's attention was diverted by Meggie Tetiopoulos's voice, sharp and clear. Its owner was in an argumentative mood. "I don't see how there can be any doubt about it. They'd been lovers for years."

"That's impossible," said Julia, without heat, for, as usual, she was sure of her facts. "They met for the first time at the Argentine dinner and it was only a week later that Laretez disappeared."

"Was murdered, you mean."

"There's no proof."

"Well, a man doesn't walk out of the house in the middle of the night in pyjamas and fall into the sea and be conveniently washed away in a dead calm."

"How d'you know it was calm?" Baiting Meggie was an approved sport. There was nothing she wouldn't say if given the requisite encouragement.

But Mrs. Wraxendon, who was not interested in backstair gossip even when its staleness had acquired the bouquet of years, intervened with, "I should think a man could walk anywhere in Carrasco in pyjamas and

they would surely not be more surprising at night than in the daytime."

Julia, for whom the subject was of permanent interest, since she'd had the desire and the intention, but not the ability, to lose everything for love, pointed out that it was only a few minutes after midnight when the Duke left the Casino.

"He had an assignation with Elena. What did I tell you?" insisted Mrs. Tetiopoulos.

"Then why was her husband present?"

"He must've been waiting to catch them out."

"In pyjamas?"

Meggie was no match for the other's common sense. "What does it matter anyway? He was there."

"How d'you know?"

"If he hadn't been there, how could he've been murdered?"

Julia, who derived enjoyment from her friends' tales in exact ratio to their improbability, was frankly delighted. "You are the best entertainment in this place," she said. "I do wish you'd stay here longer. You know, the police theory was that Fernando Laretez had gone away before dinner. His car was missing. It was found miles along the coast. . . ."

Meggie interrupted. "But if they were lovers, they'd've had to get rid of Fernando."

"Lovers, after a week in Uruguay, where a woman never moves without her whole family?"

"I tell you they'd met before."

"He'd only just come from Spain."

"He said he had."

Julia was highly amused. The story meant nothing

to her. She'd known none of the characters. So she applied the spur of a doubtful expression, but there was a limit to Mrs. Tetiopoulos's imagination. She repeated crossly, "Of course they'd met."

"Pre-natally, perhaps," suggested Julia, and Sally asked what she meant. She was surprisingly ignorant of biology.

Then Kay came downstairs and made everyone in the room look ordinary. Meggie Tetiopoulos gasped at sight of her hair, bleached, she supposed, or was it a wig? Jeremy, offering cocktail and cigarette and generally getting in the way because, for him, there was only one person present, tried in vain to establish communication between himself and the woman who was, without any effort, the centre of attraction.

Agnes Wraxendon asked, "How's Mr. Strang? I do hope it wasn't a bad bite."

Kay replied that it was all right. George was having a bath.

Mrs. Jenkins spoke with less than her usual consequence of horses that had behaved with equal lack of consideration. She was in the middle of a description of the American Minister whose cob had fallen down at a standstill, "While he was actually talking—fancy—and the grass wasn't slippery. His legs just shot from under him and there he was on the ground . . ." when Kay, seated in the corner of the sofa, looked up and across the heads of the others. Jeremy was leaning against the wall beside the curtained entrance and their eyes met. For them the room was no longer in perspective. It was an infinity of space, filled with sound, through which they sought and established the contact they desired. Their bodies seemed to them fused by a

sudden blaze of passion, but from a distance their eyes questioned with a grave intensity suited to the occasion. There was so much they wanted to know about each other.

Kay thought, how could I have hesitated? What more do I want? She relaxed against the back of the sofa and watched the man between narrowed lids, while all of herself flowed out to him between the talk and the gestures of the people who unnecessarily cluttered the room. At intervals, while she felt herself in Jeremy's arms, she looked at the faces surrounding her and found it natural that they should belong to strangers. Yet the house itself was familiar. It belonged to her, or she, perhaps, to it.

It was Jean who first became conscious of strain. She looked up suddenly and had the peculiar impression that she saw two people's faces undressed. It was only for a second. Then Kay leaned towards the irrepressible Meggie who within the last few minutes had divorced the manager of the Telephone Company from his delectable wife, bankrupted the Chief Engineer at the freezing-plant and expressed doubts as to the Bishop's sanity.

Jean, frowning violently at Jeremy, who she thought was giving away altogether more than he ought to do, was aware of other eyes upon him. Sally was sitting up, staring like a child on the verge of tears. Her lower lip quivered and her small, brown face was crumpled. Jean felt old and wise in comparison to the scrap of a girl who looked as if, for the first time in her life, a grown-up had refused her something on which she'd set her heart.

The curtains swung along the pole and Jean, glancing casually at them, saw George standing in the

shadow beyond the arch. She wondered how long he'd been there and then she was really frightened, for the man's face was unrecognizable. The whole meaning of it seemed to be concentrated in his eyes, and they were murderous.

Jean, whose policy, rooted in an inferiority complex that had been unchecked for a dozen years, was quiescence under any circumstances, rose to her feet, deliberately upsetting a glass over Mrs. Jenkins's skirt. In the slight disturbance which followed, she was able to whisper to Tony, "George's in the hall. He looks very odd. Bring him in here and stick to him. I'll explain afterwards."

The girl must have possessed more force of character than she, or anyone else, imagined, for Tony, with one appraising look which convinced him of her seriousness, went out and could subsequently be heard talking to a reluctant George.

Kay had said something about getting a napkin to mop up the spilt cocktail. She went through the door into the back premises and was immediately followed by Jeremy. The half-Indian servant, who'd broken another tooth, so that her smile was still further serrated, brought a dishcloth, but the others did not reappear.

Without conscious volition, they'd gone, one after the other, through the tiny kitchen, across the porch and into the steel-grey of the garden. Kay waited under the willow and through its branches she saw the stars swinging in an unsteady sky. She traced the outline of the Southern Cross, five drops of cold white light, with the pointer stars towards the River. The night was tenuous and very clear. Shape without bulk was etched upon it. Kay thought the stillness waited on

the beating of her own heart, and then she was in Jeremy's arms. He'd come up quickly behind her and without speaking, swept her against his shoulder, holding her there, but not trying to kiss her.

For a moment they stood motionless and silent, savouring only the relief of physical contact. Then the man bent and kissed the hair which gleamed against his coat. Kay raised her face, still without words. With the meeting of their lips, the irritation by which they'd been encompassed during the last few days and which had seemed to them eternal, passed from them. In the place of baffled discontent, they knew the deepest possible assuagement.

Footsteps sounded on the porch. George and Tony spoke simultaneously. The two under the willow clung to each other, feeling that only their lips were alive. "To-morrow," said the man. "I'll come and fetch you, about eleven. We'll get out of this place and talk."

Kay, with her eyes shut and her brain emptied of thought, relaxed in his arms. She was at peace. She didn't care what happened.

Inside the house, Jean also was talking of to-morrow. "It's all right, Sally," she said, in a hospital-nurse voice, the sort of voice she hadn't known she possessed. "They've only gone to look at the pool. I told Jeremy it was chock-full of leaves and we couldn't swim in it."

"I don't understand at all," said Sally, and added inconsequently, "She doesn't really ride well, though she has such a lovely seat."

"Don't you worry," insisted Jean, taking her arm. "I'll get hold of the Snipe somehow and come over to-morrow morning."

She hadn't time to say more, for there was a mild explosion in the lane, followed by the enraged bellow of a syren. "José Enrique!" said Sally, startled, and Jean looked round for Tony. She felt that too many things were happening all at once.

Into the house came the Leader of the Altruistas, well-dressed, faintly scented, and florescent with speech. He'd just left a cocktail party on the terrace of the Carrasco Hotel. At it were people whom it was essential his English friends should meet. From his hospitable gesture he would gladly have excluded 'the Tetiopoulos' whom he considered definitely wrong, so far as social desirability was concerned, although he admired her colouring and suspected her of a 'merry leg,' but his manners were faultless. He addressed his invitation to Mrs. Wraxendon, according her the deference he would've paid to his own exquisite Mother and because Agnes was bored with diverting the Greco-Uruguayan's conversation from the wholly imaginary sins of Elena Laretez, she accepted it.

When Kay came in from the garden, looking bewildered and mysterious, she was hurried out again in the wake of her determined hostess. José Enrique, of course, was chiefly concerned with Jean. He was willing to put up with any number of Mrs. Wraxendon's guests, however difficult it might be to explain them to his own, providing that unfathomable young person whom he'd supplied with all the qualities he most admired, would dance with him on a marble floor, within sound and sight of the sea. But Jean, who generally avoided unpopular decisions, found it unexpectedly easy to say NO. She said it to such good effect that, very shortly, she and Tony were left alone

in the Extraordinary House, for a despondent Sally had ridden off with her husband and George wasn't letting his wife out of his sight.

"Fereira's not a bad fellow," said the Englishman; "any amount of pluck. He was playing polo the other day, his camp team against some soldiers, and their Captain went for him without any justification at all, claiming an intentional foul. Fereira was as cool as my hat. He just said to the fellow, 'I'm not one of your privates. If you insult me again, you'll have to meet me after the game.' And there was no doubt of his intentions. He'd've had his knife out—that's how they fight in the camp, and the other man knew it. He didn't say another word."

"Yes, I'm sure he's brave enough," agreed Jean, without interest. "But what exactly are the Altruistas?"

"Same as Sinn Fein. D'you know what that means?"

"No."

"'For ourselves alone,'" retorted Tony, grinning. But, watching Jean's face which was unusually hard, he added at once, "I say, what's up? I glued myself to George and he was like one of my old razors. D'you think his chest's bad?"

"I don't know. D'you mean to say you've noticed nothing at all?"

"What sort of thing?"

"Only that Jeremy's gone mad over Kay and I should say she's just about as dotty."

"Mrs. Strang! I don't believe it. Her head's screwed on all right."

"Well, it's come loose and if we don't do something, it'll fall off altogether."

Tony was inclined to think it wasn't his business, but if Jean was worried he supposed something must be done about it.

"Sally's miserable," continued her contemporary, and thought that, at last, she'd found someone more defenceless than herself.

"Come on! There's no damage done yet."

Jean thought rapidly. If there was going to be any damage, it would be quick and sudden. That was the effect of the house. She said: "Sally'd be no match for Kay. She'd just drift around, wondering what'd happened to her."

"She's a marvel with horses; there's no two ways about it."

"Horses aren't men," said Jean sharply.

"Well, Jeremy's a pretty good chap," reflected Tony, mildly uncomfortable. "He wouldn't let a fellow down."

"Under these circumstances a wife doesn't happen to be a 'fellow,'" retorted Jean with the curtness of the celebrated Lady Templedown.

But, simultaneously, she turned to the young man who was leaning against the tangle of wall by the alcove, with his hands in his pockets. "Tony, darling, the whole thing's mad I know, but it's this house, don't you feel it? It's made us all different. I was a complete coward till I came here and now, to-night, I feel I'm just not going to let Sally be hurt."

Jean sat on the arm of a chair, her small chin thrust out and her cheeks aflame. Tony crossed to her and nearly upset the chair by leaning on the back of it. "Don't be an owl," he said with much affection and very little conviction.

"There you are! You feel it yourself. The house has been kind to you. You're all nicely fitted together and complete. No loose ends. If you stay out here long enough you'll probably become a Senator."

Tony laughed and it was a pleasant sound. "I prefer cattle to politics."

"No criminal tendencies?" mocked Jean, and then, as the hangings shivered against the wall, releasing a scent that she always thought of as belonging to Elena, she said: "Seriously, Tony, something's having a strange effect on us. D'you remember, when we first met Jeremy, we thought he was just Sally's husband, a gentle, rather colourless young man, who always forgot some bit of harness? We laughed at him because only his horse's sense of fitness stopped the bit falling out of its mouth. Well, he changed the very first afternoon he came here and now he's an explosive timed to go off when Kay presses a button."

"She won't do it. She's too decent!"

"She would be normally, but something's got hold of her. She wants an outsize emotion to be sure she isn't wasted. I know you'll think me stark-staring, but, honestly, there are moments when her hair's in shadow and I just see that brown face of hers, that she seems to me to be the Laretez woman. They're awfully alike."

"Rot," said Tony, the more violently because of his increasing discomfort.

"It isn't," said Jean. "It's impossible, of course, and yet it's more true than any so-called reality. Don't you feel it, Tony? . . . *something is happening over again.*"

The two young people stared at each other, Jean,

frightened and controlling her fear, Tony indignant because there were things he couldn't understand. Obeying a natural impulse, he put a hand on the girl's shoulder. "It's a nervy place. You heard what Jeremy said about the wind." He thought that he'd never again be content with silence and he listened while a soft susurrus of sound made the room live. "Things like that don't happen," he added with all the authority he could muster.

"No, of course they don't," said Jean. "I know that as well as you, only on this one occasion it's nonsense, because they do . . . they are!"

She twisted round so that she confronted the man. The colour had died out of her face. She looked anxious and she caught her lip between her teeth as she sought for words. "On the ship, George was the kindest of men. He was like a nice dog. He'd let anyone pat him, but his loyalty was for Kay. Everything she did was right. Well, I can only say that when I asked you to go to him in the hall, he was a maniac. I've never seen anyone so completely out of his senses. If he'd had a knife in his hand, he'd've put it straight into Jeremy."

"A knife?" questioned the man, and he felt as if he were playing a part.

"Yes, a knife. That's how Fernando Laretez was killed."

"Jean!" Tony took hold of the thin shoulders in front of him and dragged the girl to her feet. "Why did you say that?"

"Say what?"

"About how Laretez was killed. You couldn't possibly have known. It's the one thing nobody knows."

The girl stared at him. Her eyes widened slowly. "Did I say that?" She put a hand to her lips as if to stifle something. "It was nonsense, of course. How could I know?"

CHAPTER IX

JEAN had no difficulty in borrowing the Humber-Snipe next morning, but she had considerable in dissuading Tony from accompanying her to the estancia.

"You've got to stay here," she said, fervent and decided. "It's up to you to look after George. Play golf with him. Get him out on the links and keep him there. Kay says she's going shopping. D'you understand?"

"I suppose so," said Tony. He stood in the lane, shuffling the sand with the toe of a shabby canvas shoe and thinking that they'd been a bit on edge last night. In the bright sunlight, with a jolly old wind making sails of the eucalyptus, it was obvious that nothing was going to happen. George'd had a touch of liver, or perhaps his chest was hurting. A man might get into a temper without being a murderer. So he said: "It's pretty heavy going when you get to the camp. Are you sure you wouldn't like me to come with you?"

"No, no, no!" said an emphatic young woman with a finger on the self-starter.

Tony sighed and strolled into the garden where George was exasperating his wife with suggestions for their joint amusement.

Jean drove rapidly towards the estancia, and while she evaded the haphazard divagations of cars whose occupants were piled three deep inside, while their

possessions overflowed on to the steps and mudguards, she thought of Sally, who'd had the pluck to marry on nothing and come, penniless, to an unknown country, who rode outlaws and treated them as partners and yet who wouldn't know how to fight for what she most wanted on earth. Jean's lips were closely shut. She was glad that at last she'd something useful to do. She'd been an encumbrance for as long as she could remember. A woman in a shapeless print overall, swelling suggestively over her middle, left the domed mud oven, like a bee-hive on stilts, in which she was baking, to open a gate. She pulled some children out of the way and without slackening speed, Jean drove across the paddocks, for they all regarded the Snipe as a hunter which had never learned to refuse.

The estancia was not deserted because the lame horse was still browsing in a flower-bed. Chickens roosted on the chairs in the porch and a number of dogs precipitated themselves to greet the new-comer. But there was no sign of the Manager or his wife. Jean looked into the living-room and found it empty. She stood under various windows and shouted, but there was no response. At the bottom of the home paddock an Indian horse-breaker with rings in his ears, a revolver upon his right hip and a formidable knife in his belt, was lunging a colt. For a moment Jean watched him. He played the animal like a forty-pound salmon on light tackle. Then she went indoors followed by several Alsatians, an elongated dachshund and what was generally referred to as the result of a temporary infatuation between a bull-terrier and a piece of coconut-matting. On a rug in the hall, a cat was licking a newly-born kitten. Jean

stepped over it and went upstairs. A bedroom door banged in the wind. Behind it, crumpled on a bed that hadn't yet been made, Sally in bombachas and riding-boots, a shirt of Jeremy's swathed round her shoulders, lay with her face and arms mixed up in the pillows. She was sobbing with the abandon of someone very young and hopeless.

Jean pulled away the bedding with which she was confused. "It's no use crying," she said firmly.

Sally, sitting up, with one foot doubled under her, retorted: "He's going to Buenos Aires."

"When?" asked Jean.

"I don't know," returned the other, pulling at the end of a sheet and subsequently rubbing her eyes with it. She didn't apologize for her condition and Jean didn't comment on it. Instead she said in a voice which she hardly recognized as her own, "He won't leave you."

The elusive but fundamental wisdom which had been the background of Sally's blue eyes had gone. They looked as if they'd been too much in the wash and the lids were swollen, but the girl had the dignity of complete naturalness. She still said exactly what she thought and she put up no pretence of not minding. "He will go if Mrs. Strang wants him to. And Ben's leg is filling. He promised to look at it. I don't know whether to blister or not." Horses were comfortably normal. She wanted to think about them.

"Where is he now?"

"I had him brought up. He's better in a stall. . . ."

"No, no . . . I mean Jeremy."

"He's gone to Montevideo. I don't know when he'll be back."

Large tears welled into Sally's eyes and hung there. Her skin was smooth as silk, but it was stained and blotched with weeping. She looked expectantly at Jean, but said nothing. "Well, let's get out. You'll feel better on a horse. Can you lend me some breeches?"

Sally nodded. "I don't know what to do. Are you going to stay? I don't think there's anything for lunch."

"It doesn't matter," said Jean. She'd come prepared to ask questions and to tell Sally exactly what she must do to keep Jeremy. First of all, she must have it out with him sensibly, but, looking at the girl drifting gently between cupboards and drawers, she realized that the last thing Sally's unconscious delicacy would admit was what her contemporaries regarded as a show-down. "Could you fear to tell me," said Jean, while she was sewing a very necessary button on the belt of Sally's best bombachas, "exactly what Jeremy said? You see, I do know Kay very well and I like her awfully, so I feel there must be some way out of this muddle if we all keep our heads." The other girl looked as if she wasn't interested in heads. "He didn't say anything except that he was going to Buenos Aires."

"Didn't you talk about Kay?"

"No," said Sally as if such reticence were the most natural thing in the world.

Jean was, for the moment, dumbfounded. She was used to a world which delighted in explanations. "Then how d'you know what he means to do?"

The shadow of a smile flickered across Sally's lips. For the moment, her eyes were direct and sensible. She looked round the small, shabby room, deficient of all comforts and most necessities, which she shared

with Jeremy, and to Jean's surprise she found her question answered. Marriage, to Sally, hadn't been just an experiment. Probably it hadn't even been fun. She and Jeremy had been up against it together. They'd had to fight. Perhaps they hadn't always had enough to eat. Their job carried no salary. When times were good, they got a percentage, but the years were lean. It'd been as much as they could do to keep going. The whole history of their marriage was in that room with its inadequacies and its intimacy. Jeremy's socks with holes in them were piled on a ledger, in which the entries were in Sally's rounded hand. A pair of his pyjamas with the sleeves and trousers turned up had evidently been used by his wife. There was a bit and a broken stirrup leather on the chest of drawers, with soap, toothbrushes and an ointment for ringworm. Jean thought, of course she knew ! How could she help knowing. They've lived together, not just existed side by side. What a tremendous lot they must know about each other, perhaps everything. She was embarrassed by such intimacy and a little jealous of it. She wondered if she could bear it with any man and how much she would lose if she couldn't.

While Jean and Sally rode over the camp talking about horses, rather than the problem by which both were in different measure disturbed, Kay sat with Jeremy in the Parque Hotel at Montevideo. The hall, not unlike an ornate sepulchre, was deserted except for the porter who occasionally regarded them across the top of his desk. Untasted cocktails stood on a table in front of them. The window was open and through it came the hoarse discordancy of syrens, the clatter of high-heels on the terrace and the whining rush of

trams. Across the road was a popular beach, crowded with brightly coloured tents and umbrellas. In the water, unusually calm, the innumerable heads capped in orange, red and emerald green, looked like highly polished buttons scattered over a length of silk.

"D'you feel the same to-day?" asked Jeremy, to whom actions were easier than words. He offered a crumpled packet of cigarettes. When Kay shook her head, he leaned his elbows on the table and with his chin cupped in his hands, gazed at her from under the prominent brow below which his face narrowed till the jaw took hold of it and gave it shape.

"I do," said Kay, "but I haven't the least idea why, because the last thing I want to do is to hurt George."

Jeremy, who'd spent a sleepless night and been further tormented by Sally's lack of opposition, so that her small drawn face, helplessly acquiescent, drifted continually in front of his eyes, looked at the pattern which he was carefully tracing with toothpicks. His body was on the rack. He could feel his nerves like wires, cutting the skin. He wanted to push aside the table and take hold of the woman who was his. He'd never felt like this about Sally. There'd been a great deal between them, lovely and delicate things, laughter, all sorts of absurd work that was really amusement, difficulties which they'd refused to recognize, intimate talk about horses and less confidential moments when they'd thought about themselves, but never this intolerable ache which played tricks with sight and breathing. Jeremy was not at all sure that he really saw the slight figure in a rough white woollen suit, with a green scarf tied under one ear, but he felt her in every vein and every stiffened muscle. "Somebody's got to be

hurt," he said roughly, and thought how unfair that it should be Sally.

Kay said : " In all my life I've never wanted anything like this." She thought, on the whole, she'd been pretty decent. She could've had an easier time if she'd let herself go and sometimes it had been damned difficult playing up to George. He was dull enough when he hadn't anything to do, but she wouldn't let him be despondent. She'd done more than keep him in the desert of their London years. She'd made tremendous efforts for him, so that he shouldn't realize how unhappy he was. The only amusement she could offer him was herself and she'd drawn so extravagantly on her brain and wit and vitality that she'd gone far towards exhausting them. On board ship she'd felt as empty as a melon-rind tossed out of the cook's galley. But from the Extraordinary House she'd drawn first healing and then a passionate desire to live the rest of her life as she chose.

Kay took a cigarette and lit it before Jeremy could reach the matches. She said : " We shall all be hurt. I don't care. There are so many weary years in which we're just mould turned into furrows under the plough. When one can really live, it's no use counting costs, or thinking of consequences."

She looked at the man with keen and brilliant eyes. They were blades, piercing his body. " If one can't afford to pay for such delight as this, one is spiritually bankrupt and that's the end of it. If one's afraid to pay, one might as well be dead." She caught sight of herself in a glass and was startled by her own beauty. But there were lines at the corners of her mouth. The years in which she'd have the chance of what she called ' living ' were numbered.

"Well then," said Jeremy, resolutely disregarding the misery of Sally's face which had become part of whatever he looked at, "will you come with me to Buenos Aires?"

Their eyes met and held each other. Neither was conscious of anything but the demand the other was making. Without moving, they reached out to each other. It was as if the table and the glasses on which the frost was melting, had disappeared. They were being dragged together by white-hot hooks which tore and burned their flesh.

"When?" said Kay under her breath.

"I have to go there next week to see my boss. Will you make some excuse and come over on the night boat?"

Jeremy was livid under his sunburn. He didn't like what he was doing, but he'd been ignorant of sex until he married and now it seemed to him that he knew nothing about it at all. Kay was more than a woman. She was his chance of romance. He'd thought it had eluded him. He'd been content with the dear delightfulness of Sally, but he'd known there were stronger emotions, denied to him with the doubts, despair and esctasy whose echoes sometimes reached him in books and native music and the faces of campesinos who'd killed for the sake of their women.

"George would want to come too," said Kay, and remembered in kaleidoscopic fashion the many journeys she and her husband had made together. They'd turned travelling into a fine art. Kay could leave a train, after three days with the mercury bursting out of the top of the thermometer, looking as cool and neat as if she'd just entered it. There was that time in the Taurus when the carriages were inches deep

in sand and the water-tank had leaked. George had soaked his handkerchief in the last drops from their bottle and made her tie it over her eyes which were needles in her aching head. And the cabin between Aden and Jibouti, where the solitary bunk was thick with cockroaches. They'd spent the night on deck, with some bales of strong-smelling spice for pillows and when she woke sore-throated in the morning, George had been standing over her with a cup of tea. What was the use of looking back? The past, which she'd always imagined a permanent possession, had come to pieces in her hands. The future was left to her. She wondered suddenly how much of it would be at her disposal. "Tell me," she said, "how old are you?"

Jeremy was startled. "Why on earth d'you want to know? I'm twenty-six, but does it matter?"

"Not at all," said Kay. "I'm thirty-five."

"Yes?" said the man, without interest. He was incapable of considering such trivial details as age, finance, or even what they'd do after their few days in Buenos Aires. All that mattered was that Kay and he should be together. The future could settle itself.

The woman was aware of his mood. She realized that at this, the most important moment of their lives, they were stupefied by excess of feeling. Sitting within arm's length, they made no attempt to touch each other and for the most part they were silent. Occasionally they dragged out a few words and offered them shyly between cigarette smoke, but all that they really knew, or cared about, was that they would be together.

"You must stop him coming. You can, can't you?" said Jeremy after a long pause, and Kay had to gather her thoughts before she could remember to what he referred.

"I suppose so," she said. "Yes, of course I will."

A woman with lacquered eyelids and hair in varnished wisps, entered the hall, accompanied by several men. She was ugly, brilliant and assured. With the manners of a beauty, she settled herself at a table and the men fussed round her. Kay thought, 'Which of them is her lover?' and some part of her brain registered the incomparable chic of the make-up which might have been a travesty.

"Let's go," urged Jeremy, always fidgeted by a crowd, and as he paid for the cocktails they hadn't drunk, he said in a voice that was like a cloak: "You do realize how much I care."

Kay looked at him, surprised because to her the whole thing was too big for expression. She couldn't have measured how much or how little she loved, or if she loved at all, for her sentient life was reduced to one overmastering need. She said, "Yes. Of course," without any conception of what she meant and she'd followed Jeremy into the glare of the street before she knew what she was doing.

They stood there, with their hands touching, while the man said, "It's only a few days," and the woman furtively moistened her lips because they and her heart and her body were equally dry. She was being consumed by fires which she couldn't slake. "Have we settled anything?" she asked, and Jeremy's hand closed over hers.

"Yes," he said. "Buenos Aires next week and after that wherever you like. You won't fail me? Promise."

His dark eagerness was suddenly pathetic. Kay felt as if a child were tugging at her skirt. "Of course not."

"Let's walk. I can't let you go yet."

They went to the end of the street below which the beach was soiled ivory. A wind rose out of nowhere and scuttled paper-bags round their feet. Some dead rats had floated in from a wreck and were being rolled about on the edge of the waves. The sand hissed as it was blown against the sea-wall. A seller of lottery tickets bellowed raucously and his blue and white sheets flapped up against his face.

The wind dropped as quickly as it had risen and Kay, who'd been walking blindly, with her hand in Jeremy's, said: "I don't think I can bear this. I must think. Somehow I've got to think." The man quickened his steps so that Kay had difficulty in keeping up with him. "Perhaps we're mad, but I don't see that it matters very much so long as we're mad together."

There were taxis at the end of the street. Kay said: "I'm going to leave you now. I must get back for lunch."

"You'll be very late."

"It doesn't matter. I must go."

"Will you ride with me this evening?"

"Perhaps. I don't know. What does it matter?"

She counted the number of days on her fingers. "After that we'll be together," she said.

Jeremy's lips shaped into new lines.

Kay thought, nothing of us will be the same after this. It isn't time that marks us. We do it all to ourselves. Confused, she touched the man's arm and left him, walking quickly past the taxi which she'd meant to take, into a narrow street bordered with planes. It was empty except for a woman knitting on a doorstep, and comparatively cool. Kay's steps

became more and more uncertain until at last she stopped and stared blankly at the tram-lines which were threads of metal in the dust. A car which was coming towards her slackened speed, turned to the pavement and stopped. From the window leaned Doña Maria, upholstered in black. "Mrs. Strang!" she called. "It is you, of course."

There was a peculiar urgency in her voice which forced Kay to collect her wits and sent her automatically to the car.

"You must excuse me," said the Uruguayan, whose face was paler and more expressive than usual. "It may be that I was a little insistent. I interrupted your thoughts, *no es?* But for the moment it was so strange, I really thought you were somebody else."

The beady brown eyes, over which the lids drooped with the effect of crinkled tissue, were regaining their reserve. Kay saw it as a shutter slipping slowly into place and she caught hold of the window-frame and asked sharply: "Who did you think I was?" It was imperative that she should know.

For a moment Doña Maria resisted the pressure of a strength comparable with her own. Then she said something in Spanish to her chauffeur. The man left his seat to open the door for Kay.

"Get in," ordered Doña Maria, tapping the seat beside her with a fan of ivory and painted chicken-skin. "I will take you wherever you want to go."

"To Carrasco?" said Kay, but she didn't care where they went. There was something she had to know.

With the Englishwoman beside her, Doña Maria attempted to marshal the forces on which for years she'd depended. She was not used to talking to

strangers, but, momentarily, the olive-brown face with one side of the hair hidden under the hat of the moment and the body poised with a grace that appeared to be arrested on the edge of movement, had been disconcertingly familiar.

"Tell me, please," said Kay, as if it were her right, and the Uruguayan succumbed to the simplicity which years ago had attracted her in a younger woman. "You'll think me very fanciful," she said with a smile sketched about her colourless lips, "but *en passant* you reminded me of Elena Laretez. It was, of course, only something in the posture, for she was a girl when I last saw her. . . ."

Kay interrupted, her mouth a hard line and her eyes steel bright. "How old was she then?"

"Twenty-four perhaps, or twenty-five was it? Yes, twenty-five and that is no longer girlhood with us, but she was so gentle and quiet. It was as if she apologized always for her beauty."

Kay said sharply: "She's thirty-five now—my age."

Doña Maria looked at her with curiosity. She wondered why she'd been disturbed by a chance resemblance. The Englishwoman no doubt was striking. She must use blue for her hair. It was the only satisfactory method. But except perhaps in the carriage and the line of the jaw so exquisitely distinct from the throat, there was no comparison between her and the reluctant beauty of ten years ago who spoke so little and, now that Doña Maria came to think of it, said nothing at all, at least nothing which mattered, nothing in the way of those confidences usually exchanged between the female members of a family.

Kay, summing up the magnificence of her companion, so subtly restrained in uncrumpled black, with

the gleam of pearls round a high collar, wondered how much she dared ask, wondered also how much she wanted to know. "Since you mistook me for her, won't you tell me a little about Señora Laretez?" she suggested with diffidence.

"What is there to tell?" The older woman shrugged still shapely shoulders. "You have doubtless heard the most foolish stories, for which there is no justification. One cannot deny that Fernando left his wife without our knowledge and that, subsequently, she preferred to live in retirement. . . ."

Doña Maria was on her guard. She said nothing of the frenzied efforts of two great families first to find Fernando and then to prevent anyone else finding him. She did not mention their reiterated assaults on the privacy of the widow, if she were a widow, who should at such a time have been with her relations. Hadn't they a right to sit beside her, characterless in crêpe and tears, to share her innermost secrets and to preserve them jealously from the rest of the world? But Elena had resisted them all. Fortified by the high-set windows of the house which her husband had built, she'd defied tradition and the appeals of her people. The gates were barred, the doors locked. Nothing was seen of that which must have been hidden within the discreetly blind walls. Doña Maria remembered why Fernando, who'd prided himself on being a campman, handy with a horse and a lasso, accustomed to wide spaces and dwellings which opened familiarly on to the publicity of the communal porch, had chosen to build a house like a prison with a fenced garden equally unrevealing. But she dismissed the thought as irrelevant. What did it matter now?

Kay said: "Yes, but tell me what she was like,

before all that happened. And her husband, was he nice ? ”

The last word was ludicrously inadequate. The Uruguayan swept it aside. “ Fernando was the nephew of my husband's first cousin, Juan Fonseca de Leon y Laretez, a perfectly suitable husband for Elena. He was a splendid rider. I remember at a buck-jumping contest on the estancia next to our own, he rode seventeen wild horses one after another and not the worst among them could make him fall. He was a fine, large man, and how devoted to his wife ! They had been married for six years, without children, which was a great grief to Elena.”

Doña Maria remembered that neither husband nor wife had said anything about their grief, but it must have existed. Doubtless it accounted for that strange detachment of the beauty who could have had every man in society at her feet.

Kay asked : “ Did she love him ? ” That to her was the key to the whole situation. What were the relations between the splendid Fernando who could master outlaws after peons had been thrown in all directions, and the shy, retiring girl, oppressed by her own beauty, resentful of the situations in which it placed her.

Doña Maria was surprised until she remembered the extraordinary habits of foreigners. Then she replied : “ What would you ? Elena came of a good family and she was surely consulted about the marriage. Without doubt she was attached to her husband.”

“ Oh ! ” said Kay, and let her imagination run riot, while the car slid along the smooth macadam roads with cycles of blinding white sand laid flat against the sea. The summer villages were crowded with preposterous figures in towelling or striped worsted. The

fanciful houses broke into terraces and awnings. The most modern among them were like filing-cabinets, the drawers represented by shutters. But Kay didn't notice her surroundings. Even the monstrous advertisement of the pigeon eating aspirin failed to attract her attention. She saw Elena as she was always described, splendidly shy, remote and simple. Such a woman would be completely dominated by the man who possessed her. Yes, there was Doña Maria saying the same thing. "She never left his side. Her eyes followed him. She was restless when for a few moments he was away from her."

But it didn't fit at all. If that was Elena, she could never have succumbed to the Spaniard, never have been led or driven by him to the swift and sudden conclusion.

Kay said: "Perhaps it was fear, not love," and was amazed at the change in the old woman's face. The dark eyes, always opaque, were now tragically bleak. The lower lip was violet where it had been caught between chattering teeth. What expression remained was a lid rigorously closed. In spite of Doña Maria's charm, still displayed in voice and gesture and the casual way she turned the conversation, Kay felt she was sitting beside an enemy.

CHAPTER X

IT was on this particular day that Mrs. Wraxendon discovered she liked being alone. The revelation was a surprise to her, for she'd been so surrounded by people that she'd accepted them as a natural concomitant of existence. But quite suddenly and for no particular reason, while she sat on the balcony which had the best view of the camp, with the rest of the Extraordinary House brooding behind her, she came to the conclusion that solitude was the most gratifying of all the emotions. Not only that, but it was a passion to which one could give way with unusual satisfaction because by so doing, one was not likely to hurt anyone else.

Mrs. Wraxendon went further. On this day when, with Christmas in the background, the Uruguayans had officially acknowledged the presence of summer, so that the beaches were bargain counters heaped with bright material, she decided that it was possible to preserve the agreeable sensation of being alone even when she was surrounded by her guests. Having reached this decision, her thoughts flickered briefly over the habits and idiosyncrasies of the people staying under her roof. She was aware of what was happening between Jeremy and Kay, but less troubled by it than she might have been, for, much as she liked young people and closely as she'd been in touch with many of them, it was still a little difficult for her to appreciate

their capacity for wanton destruction. Her contemporaries had made a habit of keeping their heads, even if they temporarily mislaid their hearts. For whereas there was certainly a good deal of difference between men, there was little, if any, between husbands. The inability to distinguish between these dissident species was, to her mind, one of the most curious deficiencies of the younger generation.

To Agnes, marriage had been a career and she regretted that, in the case of her nephews and nieces, it had degenerated into a habit. Something to do with the English climate, she supposed. It had certainly changed since she was a young girl. It seemed to her that Jean would probably be much happier if she renounced all those artificial excitements generally considered productive of bliss, in order to live with Tony in a new country where the working world was not concerned with genealogy. The young man had character and all kinds of sense. He could laugh at himself, which appealed to Agnes who'd always thought she was a great joke, but had never been able to get other people to see it. She was tired of deference and bored with satellites. She liked Tony because he treated her as a person and not as an elderly lady of considerable importance. Jean needed the same sort of handling. She had become accustomed to thinking of herself as an object of ridicule, or pity. Tony would convince her that she was neither by expecting more of her than she could easily perform.

It was a delightful afternoon. The air was full of the honey-sweet scent of a tall yellow flower that grew wild beyond the lane. The perfume was so strong that Mrs. Wraxendon found herself leaning over the rail of her scarlet balcony, breathing deeply so as to

fill not only her nostrils but her lungs with the warm content of it. Swallow-tails flung themselves into the air with their arched pennons flying and a saffron woodpecker sat on a post and looked at her. The nearest eucalyptus, murmurous as usual, were covered with silver berries, and a mass of starlike jasmine, tumbling off the roof of the house, attracted the darting greed of dragon-flies.

Agnes looked across the amber-stained grass of the camp. A peon on a square saddle, heaped with sheep-skins, was ambling after some cattle. He carried a twelve-foot pole balanced on one toe. Among the eucalyptus a mud hut was gaining form. Round it some dark, gypsy-looking people, the men naked to the waist, the women serene and large, were moving lazily between an aromatic fire and the branches which they used as cupboards, chairs and dressers. Agnes, her eyes on the distant barrier of pines which closed the horizon, found the view eminently satisfactory. She understood why Elena had been content for so many years with the substitution of gum-trees, a wind of their own telling tales among their branches, and cotton-grass for the casino and the terraces frequented by her relatives. It was profitable as well as interesting to be on such good terms with oneself. Agnes felt that she'd not been sufficiently concerned with her own character. It was full of engaging surprises. Her thoughts positively overflowed. She saw them trickling over the edge of a bowl and it occurred to her suddenly that it would be rather amusing to write. A friend had given her a magnificently upholstered diary as a parting gift. It'd been left in one of her trunks, upstairs, probably, in an attic.

Mrs. Wraxendon was extremely active. In the whole

of her life she'd never refrained from doing anything because she was tired. In fact she'd annoyed a good many women who'd inquired solicitously whether she was not, or would not be tired, by some project for which they hadn't sufficient initiative, by replying : "Yes, I expect so, but what does it matter?" So as soon as she remembered the diary, she went up the winding stairs that led to the attics and pulled about the heavy trunks until her attention was diverted by a carved mahogany box with a broken hinge. It was in a corner, with a lot of dusty books and some saddlery. Agnes thought, now this of course should be the clue to the Laretez mystery. At the very least, it ought to contain a death certificate, and being in a gay humour, she imagined how it would run : cause of death, a Spaniard ; symptoms—well, how many bullets in the back? Nobody seemed to be content with one. Even the best murder included a wound or two after the corpse was dead. Agnes smiled at herself, with the feeling that it was very pleasant to have someone so companionable always at hand. Then she sat down on a suit-case which rather resented her weight and opened the box.

There was nothing inside it except some papers printed in Spanish which had certainly nothing to do with death and a few yellowing snapshots, most of them of horses. Agnes was disappointed until among the photographs she found one of a group taken outside an estancia. It was quite clear and some names were scribbled on the back, Francisca Luquini de Gonzalez, Rosilla Delgado, Fernando y Elena Laretez.

Agnes took the snapshot to the window. The woman in elaborately tucked bombachas, with a tight short-sleeved shirt showing the curves of her body, must be

Elena. Beside her, his waist swathed in a broad sash, a revenche in his hand, was a lean strong man with a face that showed nothing at all, or didn't it? Agnes screwed up her eyes and stared at the aquiline features and the lids which fell heavily, so that the eyes were slits between curtains of flesh, hard, dark and uncrumpled. The mouth, surely, was unusual. The upper lip was deeply cleft and sensual, the lower a bar, thrust out and clamped so closely upon its fellow that it seemed to be locked. A cruel mouth, thought Agnes, or was it only a struggle between two sides of the man's nature, for the curves of the upper lip, exceptionally sensitive, were harshly repudiated by the lower. She was still looking at the photograph and seeing in it far more than the camera had recorded, when footsteps sounded on the stairs.

Mrs. Wraxendon's first impulse was to keep her secret which was also of course Elena's, but when Jean came into the attic, she relented. "Look what I've found," she said, and held out the piece of paper, which was cracked and curled inwards at the edges.

The girl was tired and dispirited. She'd found nothing particularly consoling to say to Sally and she'd left her with the uncomfortable realization that as soon as the horses were stabled, their owner would crumple up in a secluded but otherwise thoroughly unsuitable place and, with her face pressed into anything handy, grass, a dog's coat, or some garment of Jeremy's, would cry until, long after the chickens should have been fed, she was too exhausted to be capable even of tears. "What is it?" she asked, dragging her feet and wondering if she'd have the courage to do what she intended.

Mrs. Wraxendon explained what was actually in the

photograph, but said nothing about that which her imagination had added. Jean took it from her, with her heart beating unaccountably fast, and frowned over the not very clear portrait of Elena. She wasn't interested in the man. Turning so that the light fell full on the shiny surface, she pored over the woman's face. It was a perfect oval, quiet and proud. The brows were exquisitely arched, but, under them, the eyes were guarded. "She's not like Kay . . . not really, is she?" said Jean, without consideration.

"Why should she be?" asked her aunt, seating herself on a trunk and glancing perfunctorily through the contents of a suit-case, for she'd remembered the diary, although she no longer wanted it.

"No, of course not. I don't know," said Jean, and realized she was talking nonsense. "I've had an awful day with Sally," she added, sinking on to the floor, from which she dislodged a quantity of dust, and ruffling her determined hair which never would behave as it was supposed to do.

Mrs. Wraxendon waited without any signs of impatience. It was unwise to hurry the confidences of the very young.

Jean, not at all certain that she wanted to confide anything at all, burst into the middle of the story: "Sally'll be smashed if Jeremy leaves her. She hasn't got anything else."

In London, she would have thought such a statement absurd, for there was always something else, too much, so that persons were obliterated by circumstances. But in the emptiness of the camp where the estancia was an outpost, it had seemed to her that a person might be essential.

Agnes collected her ideas with some care. She was

not certain if she wanted to talk about Kay, or if it would be wise to do so. According to her experience, which had been wide, it was talking which did three parts of the harm. Leave a thing alone and it found its own level ; talk about it and it was immediately imbued with proportions to which it had no claim. That Jeremy and Kay were momentarily absorbed in each other was evident. That there was anything important, by which she meant enduring, between them, she doubted. A wave of honey-sweet scent drifted through the window. That was enough to go to any woman's head and it would've been a reflection on both if Jeremy hadn't been affected by the appearance Kay chose to present to the world.

" My dear," she said in a voice purposely expressionless, " it is really rather remarkable how few smashes there are. People do the most extraordinary things and still more amazing things are done to them, but nothing happens."

Jean was not consoled, nor even diverted from her purpose. She thought her aunt's detachment selfish and she wished she could talk to Tony, but he was still on the links looking after George.

Agnes Wraxendon was aware of what her niece was thinking and she wouldn't have minded being considered a rhinoceros-hided egotist, for she knew how comforting disapproval can be, but she was sorry for Jean and less sorry for Sally, whom she would like to have bathed, brushed and generally reconditioned, so she said : " It's hardly ever any good interfering, so I shouldn't do it unless you feel you absolutely must."

Jean stretched out her well-shaped legs, the greater part of which were visible. She rubbed her cheek with a hand which had been on the floor and so was very

dirty. Smeared and childlike, she frowned at her aunt, while she attempted to assume a semblance of that superiority which she ought to, but certainly did not, feel. "You wouldn't leave someone to drown if you could help it, would you? Well, I don't see there's much difference. I'd be letting Sally do worse than drown if I didn't try to pull her out of this."

Agnes was conscious of the warmest possible affection for her niece. Surely the child had enough troubles of her own without taking on other people's. She said: "A few weeks ago I should have been convinced that Kay was the last person to do anything foolish, and even now . . ." She paused, thinking of George who, after all, was the deciding factor.

Jean said, "I don't believe she's in love with Jeremy. Any man would've done," and then she felt despicable, for it wasn't Kay's fault. She was just part of the story which had got to go on to the end and—she shivered in spite of the sweet-smelling, dusty heat—the end was already written. Glancing sharply at her aunt, she wondered if she could make her understand what was happening, while Agnes was considering how she could best explain to her niece that in such cases nothing ever did happen unless other people interfered.

Jean said: "Could you stop Kay going to Buenos Aires?"

"No," said Agnes, who disliked playing Providence except through her bank.

"You could make George go too?"

"I suppose I could if I turned him out, but, my dear, Kay isn't going to leave her husband to fend for himself. She's looked after him too long. He's her pet habit. Whatever she does with Jeremy, it won't be anything which'll permanently affect her relations

with George. She's made him what he is and no woman likes to see her best piece of work destroyed."

"I didn't think you were a cynic!"

Agnes laughed. Her amusement was fresh and unforced. "Far from it," she said, "but I believe doing nothing is much more effective than doing the wrong thing."

At that moment there was the sound of a car. The Humber-Snipe, driven by Tony, slid up the impossible lane. Out of it came golf-clubs followed by a determinedly cheerful young man whose manner was obviously strained; more golf-clubs and another man who looked as if he hated everything within range and whose expression of violent loathing, directed at his companion, was as natural as the smile with which the other returned it was the reverse.

"Aunt Agnes!" exclaimed Jean. "Come here and see for yourself."

Mrs. Wraxendon approached the window and with due regard for her clothing lowered herself so that she could see out of it.

"You can't tell me that nothing'll happen with George looking like that."

Agnes's expression was cheerful and interested. It remained so while she said, "He's probably lost all his new balls in the rough . . ." but she was thinking rapidly. It was just possible, of course, that Kay was serious, but she'd always regarded George as the mildest of husbands.

"I should say he was very nearly certifiable," said Jean in her most assured voice, which showed that she was extremely nervous. "And I only hope you'll get it done before . . ." She stopped suddenly and the colour drained out of her face. It was too horrible.

"Before what?"

Jean picked up the photograph which had fallen face downwards on to the floor. "Before it all happens again," she said. The words broke from her. They were echoing round the attic before she'd any idea she'd given voice to them. Furtively, she glanced at her aunt, expecting protest and some kind of a scolding.

Agnes was not often disturbed so that her rare criticism was the more effective, but, unlike Tony, Mrs. Wraxendon did not ridicule the idea. She asked, "Is that what you're afraid of?" and the idea seemed to be mildly interesting her, but she obviously didn't regard it as portentous. She laughed a little as she suggested: "Surely that lets you out. You can't interfere with Elena in her own house!"

Jean gasped and struggled to her feet, shaking the dust from her skirt.

"I don't believe in predestination," said the older woman, comfortingly practical, "and although I do think some places have a very strange effect on people, I can't see George committing murder, which is what I suppose you mean, and in any case it would be the wrong way about, for Jeremy ought to be in the Duke's shoes and we really don't know what happened to Fernando." She went on talking in a matter-of-fact voice as they felt their way down the winding stairs. There was no light and a thick felt did much to deaden their footsteps. "I'm sure Jeremy's aim would be all over the place. I don't suppose he's had much practice as an assassin. And George is so essentially a gentleman. How do you suppose one goes on being a gentleman when one's obliged to commit murder?" Jean was obliged to smile. Her aunt's nonsense was much more reassuring than Tony's angry confutation.

But Mrs. Wraxendon's voice broke off as they came within sight of the landing. At the farther end of it, the subject of their conversation was standing outside his wife's door. His head was bent forward and the whole of his body stiffened in an attitude of concentrated attention. No sound came from beyond the door, but his hand tightened on the thing he held. Jean thought it was one of the cutting whips of the country and she caught her aunt's arm, but George heard them and turned with a casual, "I didn't know anybody was in."

A broken mashie dangled between his fingers. "My best club," he explained, "caught it on a bit of rock. Bad luck, wasn't it?"

Jean was not sure that her voice would be steady, so she left it to her aunt to reply and was surprised when Mrs. Wraxendon seemed at a loss for words.

She saw it too, thought the girl, and wondered why it had to be a whip.

CHAPTER XI

AT dinner Kay was brilliant. She kept the others laughing with absurd exaggeration of whatever happened to come into her head. Mrs. Wraxendon decided that Paris was right. A good talker could break the original ten commandments and all those later ones concerned with grammar over which the Académie Française saw fit to wrangle. Jean wondered if in ten years, or fifteen, she'd be equally competent. Tony threw back his head and laughed until his ears were hard put to it to restrain his mouth. Only George, hunched over the table, staring moodily at whatever was on his plate, without attempting to eat it, confined himself to such spasms of politeness as were required of him.

Jean was so conscious of his silence that towards the end of the meal she kicked Tony under the table and grimaced towards the window opening on to the garden, but the young man had had enough of George. So it was Mrs. Wraxendon who eventually took him out on to the tiled porch and talked to him placidly about racing and pedigree herds and the village nursing association.

At first, the man thought he couldn't possibly bear it, because there was something going round in his head and his sight was playing queer tricks. He could've sworn he saw somebody moving under the oleanders, but it was only a shadow. Then he began to find it

peaceful like the trickle of a stream in the distance. For he didn't listen to what his hostess was saying. He thought of Jeremy and Kay and was bewildered by the intensity of his emotions. For, after all, there'd generally been some young man hanging around and Kay hadn't cared a bit and they'd laughed about it together. Well, why couldn't he laugh now? He was making a fool of himself over nothing. But Kay was different. His right hand shaped and clenched as he looked at it, surprised because he hadn't consciously directed the gesture and didn't know what it meant.

Mrs. Wraxendon moved into the garden, talking of roses, and George followed, blinking as the fireflies flicked up and down apparently against his eyeballs. He had the devil of a headache.

The other three talked desultorily. Then Kay yawned and said she was going to bed. The vitality had died out of her. She looked tired and her skin was unusually sallow. But the fear which kept Jean company, so that she was beginning to look upon it as a tangible presence connected with the house, drove her into speech, "Oh no! It's too early. Let's walk down to the Casino," and then as the other woman demurred, "I can't go by myself. Do please come, just for half an hour."

She wanted to be alone with Kay. She'd planned just what she was going to say, 'I found Sally crying herself sick. She was only waiting till I'd gone to begin all over again.' It couldn't be so very difficult. Once she got started, she wouldn't look at Kay. She'd go straight on.

Jean fidgeted and her breath quickened. She hated being mixed up in things. Deliberately, she'd denied herself the usual intimacies of her age, because she

didn't want to give herself away to anyone. Often she refrained from expressing an opinion for fear that the succeeding argument might impinge on the security she drew from her isolation. Now she was going to throw it all away. By the end of her conversation with Kay, she would be neither detached nor inviolate. But someone had got to enter the lists for Sally, since it would never occur to her to strike a blow for herself.

It was Tony who settled the matter by saying, "I vote we all go. I've a hunch I might break the bank, or somebody's head." He was suffering from the reaction of his day with George and he decided that Jean's company was due to him. So he ignored her obvious desire to be alone with Kay and within a few minutes the three of them were walking through the iridescent greyness of the night.

At the end of the lane the sea splashed gently upon the polished sands. Starlight was diffused upon the water and the rocks glittered. There was a soft brightness in the air, which crystallized into the shining berries of the eucalyptus, the gleam of a white creeper and the sparkle of shells on the beach.

The lights of the Carrasco Hotel were reflected as pennons on the water. The terrace was thronged with slight, brown figures in effective sports' clothes. They shone with hair-oil and boot-polish, liquid powder and the most improbable lipsticks. As soon as the three English reached the steps, while Kay was still protesting and Jean was trying to divert Tony to the Casino, so that her moment of courage should not be wasted, a figure detached itself from one of the small tables laden with cocktails.

José Enrique came down the steps with an air. It

was useless to protest, for his superabundant vitality swept his companions wherever he chose. At one moment they were all in the Casino, watching the long green tables and then Kay, with eyes fevered, had slipped into a seat and Tony was bending over her. Back on the terrace José's feet were moving in time to the music and before she knew what she was doing Jean was dancing with him.

A gentle wind drifted between the couples, fluttering a scarf, flicking at a tablecloth. Amber-coloured women, bare-legged, bare-armed, with hair meticulously arranged under the absurd little caps which had no visible means of support, swayed and dipped in the arms of sleek and burnished partners. Strong scents clashed with cigarette smoke. The woman with lacquered eyelids, brown as an Indian, with a streak of orange distorting her mouth, sat erect on her chair, drinking something cloudy through a straw. The lobes of her ears were painted to match her lips. A wisp of unbelievable hair lay flat upon her cheek. Jean thought she was rather fun. "That's Manuela Fonseca," explained José. "She is a different person with every new dress, but they say she is faithful to that man on her right whom she calls her 'savage.'"

"Oh," said Jean, noticing a mark on the woman's arm, but determined to show neither surprise nor curiosity.

"You dance deliciously," said José after a pause, "but, *sin embargo*, I am disappointed."

Jean, responding to his sudden sincerity, ceased being a passable copy of the sophisticated Lady Templedown and said: "You know it's awfully difficult to keep up with you."

"It is that you don't know whether you're coming

or going. See how well I talk your English slang?" said José. "Shall I tell you why I am disappointed?"

"Yes, please."

"Because I have danced with you."

Jean raised her eyebrows, but she didn't ask what he meant.

José, moving his feet only, so that they seemed to flow across the terrace, effortless as a tide, said: "It is certain that you will never do anything else with me . . . except dance."

"We might ride," mocked Jean, feeling irresponsible.

"Oh, what an excitement for reasonable people not yet in their dotage! Look, then, at all these women. You can tell their character from their shoulders."

The girl stared at one couple after another. Their faces were impassive, but their muscles spoke under thin serge or silk. She noticed them with scarcely perceptible movement and an intensity of provocation. Jean sighed and her bones responded.

"There now, you are so correct and stiff—you are certainly going, not coming, and to-morrow I shall be doing the same." José Enrique swung his partner on to the steps. "I have an idea," he said, and he looked like a good-natured black panther after a meal. "I go to my estancia and my mother, whom you know, will be with me. Why do you not come too? Why do not you all come?"

He made a gesture which included a good deal of Carrasco and Jean stopped in the middle of a refusal. Why shouldn't they go? If her aunt, who'd become extraordinary static, refused to move, Kay would have

to take her place. The invitation was just what she needed. A flush burned in the girl's cheeks. Her eyes caught the reflection of the lights. She was lovely and alive. " What a pity about your shoulders ! " said the man.

" No, no, don't joke any more. This is important." Jean caught his arm.

In another moment they were walking on the sands and, hampered by several loyalties, not the least of which was towards the Extraordinary House, Jean was trying to make a Latin understand why a man and a woman must, at all costs, be prevented from doing what seemed to him natural so long as it was secret.

The result was as Jean had expected. Mrs. Wraxendon said that nothing would induce her to give up a chance of being alone with herself and the House which was equally good company. Kay refused, at first, to play the part allotted to her and she did so with less than her usual consideration, for other people's feelings had become rather nebulous. At times, she had difficulty in believing they had any. Then it occurred to her that nothing could better fill up the intolerable six days before she could be altogether with Jeremy, than this visit, so, without explanation, she agreed to the plan as abruptly as she had hitherto objected. Tony, of course, was delighted at the chance of seeing how things worked up-country. George said very little. His eyes were hard behind his spectacles, except when he looked at his wife. Then he was distraught and miserable, for she was taking from him all the certainties with which she'd so carefully endowed him. However, within something like thirty-six hours of Jean's plotting with José Enrique, the four of them arrived at the Fereira estancia.

They'd had a hot and dusty journey. The camp was shorn by locusts. There'd been so little rain that the land was slippery as silk and smooth yellow. The house, surrounded by pepper-trees, was a square building roofed with red corrugated iron and surrounded by porches. Jean thought of it as stuck down in the middle of nowhere. There were heterogeneous outbuildings and several stockyards, but there didn't seem to be any particular reason for their existence. For endless miles the camp rolled into a succession of hollows and ridges, the latter sometimes accentuated by granite boulders. In the distance gums, willows and an occasional outraged palm marked the course of the river. Red Herefords stared lazily through a wire fence. A turkey gobbled locusts as quickly as it could, but without making any impression on the mass of insects which carpeted the track and wadded gates and posts in greenish yellow.

On the largest porch, separated by an awning from the scarlet blossom of a ceibo, sat Doña Maria rocking herself gently in a wicker chair. Her elaborately dressed hair gave the impression of a hat. Her black dress buttoned tightly under her chin. She looked exactly as she did at an afternoon party in Montevideo, yet she was not in the least out of place. "How delightful to see you," she said, rising and extending a hand of fine parchment, weighted by the emerald, while, with the other, she continued to fan herself. "It is a little hot. You will like to rest or to bath."

She was familiar with Englishwomen's mania for immersing themselves at the most inconvenient moments in any kind of water, to the detriment of their health, wits and skins. So, smiling graciously,

although when Kay was within her range of vision, the smile hadn't much meaning, she directed her son's guests to cool, whitewashed rooms, cumbered with heavy furniture. They led one into another and the windows were protected by heavy grilles. Before leaving them, with a remark about the imminence of lunch, Doña Maria opened the upper portion of a door which looked as if it ought to lead into a loose-box and there was a narrow dining-room with at least half a dozen divided portals along the wall, so that Jean thought instantly of well-bred hunters putting out their heads in hopes of a meal.

Kay was already in the bathroom. She turned a tap and a small, suction-footed frog leaped out and hung, head downwards, on the wall. She turned the other and a second frog appeared. "There doesn't seem to be any water," she murmured disconsolately, but after a while, there were several gulps, a gurgle, and two thin trickles of reddish liquid. "Shall we be dirtier or cleaner if we wash in that?" she meditated aloud and Jean, who was divided between delight and despondency, now that she was free of the Extraordinary House, said it was the exact shade of the newest complexions.

After lunch the whole party sat on the porch and made conversation. There was no doubt about the labour involved. One by one, they drew out a sentence and presented it for public inspection. Whether it contained anything remotely resembling an idea didn't matter. So long as it comprised sufficient words, it was gratefully received. Jean, dry-tongued and restless, thought that she'd never been sufficiently aware of her own stupidity. She felt it like a blow between the eyes. Tony, having upset a cigarette-box

and subsequently a pile of newspapers, decided that he was a lout and naturally Jean wouldn't look at him. George, who hadn't slept for two nights, stared at the camp with reddened eyes and saw specks dancing up and down. There was something confoundedly wrong with him, but he was no longer sure that it was Jeremy. Kay seemed completely torpid. In the place where she supposed her heart to be, she carried a lump of metal and any movement she made might intensify the discomfort it caused her. So she lay inert in a camp-chair and thought what a fool she'd been to come. When she had to speak, she did so with the edges of her lips. There was a train the next day. She could send a letter by it. But there was, in her, more than a desperate longing for Jeremy. She was out of tune with life. She saw herself tormented beyond endurance, driven by passions, that were not really hers, towards an end she dared not visualize. Her hand clenched and the pain with which she lived became so physical that she wanted to be sick.

When at last José Enrique suggested riding, she pleaded a headache and shut herself into the dim room she was, most horribly, to share with George. She'd meant to write to Jeremy, but she was without words. She walked up and down between the walls which were her gaolers and she thought of the blue benches in the garden of the Extraordinary House. After a long time, during which the light faded from the porch outside, she flung herself on her bed and stared at the ceiling where a fat spider was busy with his web. The whole of her body, aching and tormented, postulated a need for something to which she'd given the form of Jeremy. "I'm going mad," said Kay in a quiet and matter-of-

fact voice, and tried to concentrate her mind on the blue benches, for only in the neighbourhood of the House which had taken away her past and put in its place a future that obsessed and appalled her, could she find reassurance.

Across the camp rode Tony and Jean and George, with their host on a white stallion. A very old and confidential peon went with them to open the fences on which oven birds had built their nests. It was pleasantly cool, for a wind bustled out of the hollow where the river had worn a deep course between overhanging banks. The grass seemed to move with the riders, and far in front of them ostriches, like tattered grey ballerinas, flirted their wings and skidded first in one direction and then in another.

José Enrique talked of cattle. He rode well and quietly, never moving in his saddle. His eyes had lost their liquid brilliance. Between narrowed lids, they appraised the state of the land, the condition of beasts and fences. When a peon passed them, ambling along astride a vast saddle girthed upon a comparatively small pony, he greeted the man by name, asked after his family and his work.

Jean looked at him with a new respect. She thought, out here, women don't really count. Why should they? They've got to be housed and fed. They're pleasant, for a few years, to love, but they're more important as mothers. It's the land which matters. José had got down to it now. This is his place and his job. He shouldn't play at politics.

It was José Enrique who saw the first thread of smoke on the horizon. "It's beyond our boundary, but it may blow this way," he said, and without moving

hands or heels, he was off at a gallop. The others followed.

By the time they reached the fence, a line of fire spread along it. There was a smell of roast flesh where a sheep, caught in the wire, had been burned to death. The smoke was drifting away, but Fereira had already sent the ancient peon for every man within reach. He himself was working with one of the skins that had been girthed across his saddle. With blackened face, he stamped on the lean red tongues that licked at the sparse tufts of grass and beat down the flares that rushed upwards, crackling and spitting, as they caught a tussock or a dried bush. His horse stood with palpitating nostrils and the rein hanging loose.

A number of men were working on the other side of the fence and under the flailing sweep of the hides or branches they carried, the fire began to die down. Soon there were only a few wisps of smoke curling over the parched grass. "They've got it under," said José Enrique, and the next moment he was talking to a big man who had leaned upon a post. His face and hair were covered with ash. Sweat streaked it into dark runnels. His eyes were scorched and red, but it was his mouth which Jean noticed. Empurpled as it was by charred dust, with the lips pressed together so that their curves seemed to bite one into the other, it suggested such dissolute cruelty that the girl found herself shivering.

José effected a careless introduction, from which Jean plucked only the word Laretez. Then while she stared at the big man's face, found it faintly familiar and was nearly choked by the excitement which she strove to hide, there were delays that appeared to her interminable. The two men walked along the fence,

assessing damage. They stopped to talk about locusts and wool. A girth was loose. The horse broke away while it was being tightened. José had to rearrange his saddle and find his revenche. Tony, who'd used his coat recklessly, but with excellent effect, grinned all over his blackened face and said he'd lost something which he didn't seem able to describe.

By the time they were all mounted and moving away from the burned paddock, it seemed to Jean that centuries had passed and even then she couldn't possess herself of José's entire attention, for he was explaining to George, "At this time of year we have to be on the look out for fires." He turned to his foreman and ordered a man to be posted on the Laretez boundary.

Jean, who'd picked up a little Spanish, asked the reason, and her host answered without reflection: "It is best to be prepared. That fire didn't look altogether natural. It'd started on too long a front."

Tony and George were listening. One of them asked: "What's up, then?"

With a shrug José explained: "My neighbour's not very popular with his own people. It's quite likely one of them set light to that paddock and it mayn't stop at that."

"Why not?" asked Jean.

José Enrique hesitated. "*Bien!* It is well known. You can hear it anywhere! Andres is too quick with that revenche of his. Last week he'd've cut a peon to pieces if the fellow hadn't pulled out a knife. They say it was a quarrel over a woman. Andres has a bad reputation. Did you see his horse?"

Jean shook her head.

"I did!" said Tony hotly.

"A mess, eh?"

"Its sides were in rags."

José Enrique frowned. "Andres's spurs are like razors and they say he doesn't only use them on horses."

"What d'you mean?" asked Jean. Her voice was sharp. It seemed to her that something terrible and essential was within her grasp. Then her horse stumbled and the impression vanished.

The men exchanged glances, but José didn't answer the question. He said: "The Laretez men have always been of a violence that suggests madness. Their temper's been a curse from one generation to another. Andres's father cut the throat of his best horse because it unseated him. There was scarcely a peon would bring his woman on to the place. In the end the old man tried to kill himself with a shotgun and who knows how far he succeeded, for, when they found the body, there were half a dozen knife-thrusts in it."

Jean, listening avidly, found her lips dry and the muscles in her cheeks taut. She remembered now where she'd seen a replica of the big man's face. "What relation was Fernando?" she asked, and it seemed to her that each word was a drop of ice-cold water trickling down her spine. She couldn't help looking at George, jolting along with his heels swinging loose and his tired brown face sagging above his neat collar.

"The fellow who disappeared? A brother, younger by a year or two, than Andres and a spectacle in rodeo!"

"Was he the same sort?"

José reflected. After a pause he said to Tony in Spanish : " Up here they used to say he liked women and horses raw, but *por Dios*, there was no man could touch him when it came to breaking a rogue ! "

CHAPTER XII

NEXT morning José Enrique was businesslike and unshaved. He'd been up since four, had ridden a considerable number of miles and spent several hours in the office, yet when he came into the dining-room for a late breakfast, he was as fresh as if he'd only just left his bed. Tony regarded him with admiration. The fellow was made of steel. He thought of his Manager in Venezuela who had roared about the estate, looking as if he were on the verge of apoplexy. José never raised his voice in the camp. He could get the last ounce out of man or animal without appearing to ask for it.

"You can see some work in the yard this morning," said the Uruguayan. "There's a bunch of young horses in and there'll be some rough riding."

Doña Maria, with every hair in place and her black silk rustling when she moved, said: "There'll be a great deal of dust and shouting and probably we shan't get any dinner because the cook is engaged to old Tejera's daughter and she's told him he's not a man at all unless he can sit a buckjumper."

"Can anyone try?" asked Tony, eating his third egg. Jean looked at him with dismay.

José Enrique laughed. "Most of the peons have a shot at it to impress their girls, but they're generally a good deal happier when it's over. Tejera is still our star turn, though he's long ago forgotten his years."

Shortly afterwards they went out to the yard, Kay silent and withdrawn, Jean rather frightened lest Tony should be hurt and the men talking about the various methods of horse-breaking they'd seen.

In one of the smaller yards, twenty or thirty two-year-olds were charging round in a fog of dust. At times, all that could be seen above the haze was a pair of ears laid back, or a tossing mane. In the centre of the mob stood Tejera, his grizzled head bare, his face like seamed leather. A sweat rag was tied round his neck. Already his shirt clung to his body. Over his trousers, which were tucked into the usual concertina boots, he wore a leather apron. His lasso, coiled in circles, hung idly from a mahogany-coloured hand. With eyes that were reddened slits, he watched the colts and as he turned to follow the movements of the one he intended to rope, the small gold rings in his ears caught the sunlight.

"Tejera's a character," explained José after he'd greeted the men in ballooning trousers and paper-thin boots with enormous spurs, who waited for the rope to fall, envious of the old man's skill, comparing it anxiously with their own. " He speaks of himself as an Indio and is contemptuous of wheels. Look at his legs. They're shaped to fit a recado.[1] He's supposed to have fathered as many men as he's killed and they put the number high."

Jean seated herself on a harrow and José Enrique leant against an upturned shaft. George hung round Kay. His clothes and face were neat. He's a well-ordered little man, thought the girl ; why did I expect him to change into somebody quite different ?

Tejera, circling slowly, the axle of a turbulent wheel,

[1] Native saddle.

picked out a colt with quality. He waited until the head rose above the squealing, lunging mass. Then the rope in his hand came to life. It swung in widening curves, flickered, straightened and shot out, with the noose a disc at the end of it. The grey colt screamed and kicked as he felt the drag on his neck. Tejera's left hip, thrust out, bore the weight of the animal's resistance. Then a couple of peons flung themselves on the rope and the grey was drawn free of the mob. A twist of the old man's body and he was thrown. In a swirl of hot, brown dust, the peons were on him. His legs were hobbled and his wild head held while a thong was thrust into his mouth and tied over the lower jaw. The primitive bit cut into his lip and blood streaked the men's hands. With a shout of encouragement, they scrambled away and the colt, still hobbled, plunged to his feet, reared wildly and charged out of the gate which opened in front of him. Tejera held the lasso like a rod. When the grey was a yard or two beyond the rail, he flung his weight on it, twisting sideways with every muscle tautened against the strain. The rope hissed over his worn leather apron and the colt was flung heels over head. Momentarily the crash must have stunned him, for he lay as he fell, with sides heaving like bellows and nostrils wide. A saddle was thrust upon him and sheepskins girthed over it. Then a boy leaped across the prostrate body, standing with legs wide and a hand on the front of the recado. Lasso and hobbles were withdrawn. The colt plunged to his feet. As he did so, his rider settled into the saddle and with a cut of the revenche urged the animal to show his mettle. The grey needed no further incitement. With head down and legs rigid as posts, he arched his loins till the saddle

was the apex of a triangle and flung himself off the ground. Threshing his powerful quarters, he turned in mid-air and came down with a jar which shook his rider, who had neither stirrups nor reins. Three times the grey bucked and then the boy went over his head.

Jean started from her seat on the harrow, but José put a hand on her arm. "It's all right," he said. "Look, he's up and he feels no end of a man. He'll be boasting about it to-night."

A couple of mounted peons had ridden in on each side of the colt and were driving him towards the rails. The boy wanted to try again, but Tejera had his eye on a bay whose ears were flat. He threw him faultlessly, but the animal broke from the men's hold as they tried to bit him, and when he was brought down again outside the yard, his eyes were wild and blood trickled from a nostril. The peon who scrambled on to the recado, stayed there hardly long enough to raise his whip. Fighting mad, the bay threw three men one after the other. Then José Enrique called to the riders who were trying to hustle the colt into a corner. He ran lightly across the trampled earth, followed by old Tejera, who'd been shouting instructions to the youths hurtled about by the bay. There was a flurry of dust in which men and horses were confused. Then José was in the saddle, his knees driven into the sheepskins, his long legs gripping the recado. The bay hurled himself into the air, where he became a whirring cone. Tail and head had disappeared. His back was a piston pumping up and down. But after the first plunge, which swayed him forward, José Enrique didn't move. With legs thrust down and feet crushed inwards, he sat erect upon a pyramid of raging, squealing bone and muscle. The peons shouted and

their patron's whip went up. When the bay felt the cut of raw-hide, he hurtled round like a catapult, threw a succession of shattering bucks, after each of which he came down with legs like ramrods and bolted straight for the farthest rails. Jean shut her eyes. It seemed to her that an accident was inevitable, for the riders who were supposed to keep one on each side of the rogue, were outdistanced. They spurred helplessly and the bay kept his lead. Within a few yards of the fence, José Enrique flung his whole weight to one side and simultaneously crashed his revenche on the bay's cheek. The colt swerved, slid a few yards and came down. His rider swung over his head and was immediately on his feet. Tejera ran towards him, muttering. The bay was beat. He allowed himself to be ridden back to the yard by a boy who made great play with his whip.

"I think it's sickening," said Jean to Tony. "Let's get away." She admired José's courage, but it was a brutal spectacle. She couldn't think why Kay sat there, with her eyes fixed and staring. She hadn't missed anything. Her lips were warmly red and parted. She's enjoying it, thought Jean, with a shiver of repulsion.

George was interested. Watching one animal after another thrown headlong, with heaving flanks and terrified eyes, he thought that after such treatment a horse would either be spiritless, or savage for the rest of its life.

Tony said: "I must see if I can sit one."

They gave him a weedy brown with muscles like wire springs. The peons saw that he had a fair chance. They clustered like locusts about the colt, holding him by main force until the Englishman was in the saddle.

Then they slipped the wide hobbles and the brown bucketed across the paddock in a series of short, stiff bounds. Tony, hatless, in an old shirt and grey flannel trousers, succeeded in sitting them, but they jarred his back. The riders galloped up to him, yelling encouragement and the brown suddenly shot upright. Tony saw the lean head above his own and thought it was coming over backwards. Then it seemed to him that the quarters hit him in the back. He saw the earth rush up at him and the next second he was over the place where the brown's head should have been and the peons were riding off the colt which showed every intention of savaging a fallen enemy.

"You got a bad one," said José Enrique. "It's often the weediest, who look as if they wouldn't move, who put up the best performance."

Jean said : "I think you were marvellous, but it's too disintegrating to watch."

"Well, let's walk down to the river. We might see some of these long-legged creatures that look like hares gone wrong."

They wandered away while George was saying, "No, I'm too old for that sort of thing. My bones need a bit of care."

The grass was alive. It swept round their feet with a queer, sibilant whispering. "It's no good for feed," said Tony, in his element. "You see, even the locusts have given it up."

The better paddocks were clipped and smooth. The last hoppers swarmed across them, an orgy of succulent bodies, on which the ostriches had eaten themselves sick. The air was full of wings. The whirr of them was like the tuning of stringed instruments. Jean walked with an arm in front of her face.

"Horrible, aren't they?" she said. The flash and shimmer of the torpedo-shaped bodies suggested missiles and they bumped against an occasional post with the plop of a spent bullet. As the wind strengthened, they were whisked along with it, tissue-paper, transparent in the sunshine. "The sky isn't black with them," continued Jean, remembering descriptions she'd read. "I don't see how it ever could be. They need too much space for their wings."

"Fleshy and rather foul," commented Tony as an insect squelched against his forehead.

They made their way slowly through air that had suddenly become, not only tangible, but unpleasantly prickly, fending off locusts until at last, among the trees by the river, they found comparative peace. Tony flung himself on the ground, regardless of ticks. Jean climbed on to a convenient branch. She said: "I don't know whether I've got into the habit of seeing double these days, but José is so different up here, he's scarcely credible."

"He's a good chap," said Tony, as if the matter were settled.

Jean thought of her host's conversation in the fish restaurant. She supposed he'd been pulling her leg. She stretched out a slim ankle and regarded it with disfavour. "He says whatever comes into his head which is so different from most of the Uruguayans one meets at Carrasco," she reflected.

"He's an original. That's why he's got such a following. Strip that sort of boulevardier manner which is a pose, the result of too much Paris, and you can see for yourself he's stuffed full of sense."

"He sat that wretched colt as if it were a half-dead donkey. And thought nothing of it. It was just part

of the day's work, like being shot at and obstructing the police and making inflammatory speeches which he'd like to believe true, which may be true, some day, if this wretched crisis ever ends."

Jean stretched along her branch and regarded a scarlet spider which was trying to get into a crack. "I don't see José Enrique as a politician."

"Why not? He's just the kind to lead a people's party. He doesn't care a blow about possessions. He'd like to cut up all this and settle small-holders on it." Tony waved an arm at the sunburned landscape and a flock of small green parakeets tumbled out of a tree and flew away, screeching like the children who disturbed Mrs. Wraxendon's sense of fitness.

"But can you imagine an M.P. shooting up fat, blue policemen in Pall Mall?"

"José didn't do it for fun. Free speech is doubtless included in all the other freedom for which his party stands. The Altruistas would say it was an unconstitutional arrest and as such José had just as much right to resist it, as any citizen has to protect himself against bandits."

"But what does he hope to gain?"

"Nothing for himself, unless it is a few extra flats of limelight, but everything desirable, equitable and quite impossible for the People."

At that moment a number of peons in torn shirts and faded trousers passed, bare-footed, along the river bank.

"They say shoes are a test of civilization," said Tony. "Look at those men. When they ride, they fasten spurs with rowels the size of soup-plates over their naked heels. They live by whatever they can get out of the earth and sleep as close to it as they can. All they want is a knife and a horse and a bit of silver on the

bridle. They're the People whom José would like to turn into artisans with a minimum wage and thirty-hour week and pensions before they're in sight of middle age."

Jean repeated a question that was often on the lips of her eminent father. " Where's the money to come from ? "

" There you have the snake in the Altruista paradise and I daresay José knows it, but that doesn't impair his sincerity. Perhaps he thinks if he talks enough fiction, it'll become fact." Tony sucked a piece of grass and added : " All the same he's quite capable of dying for something he knows is impracticable. That's his charm. He isn't logical, or restrained, or non-committal like those fellows at the golf-club, who'd as soon have told us about the habits of the Laretez family as eaten the ends of their niblicks, but when he bursts out with a theory, or a story, it's dead straight as he sees it. There's none of this muttering about ' a thing among men ' which means a lot of hush-hush and somebody getting away with a crooked deal. José fights in the open and if he makes a fool of himself, it's where everyone can see it."

" You like him as much as all that ? "

" Yes, I do," said Tony. He was in a mood to tilt at windmills. Jean, in a yellow dress, with her hair blown up so that every separate wisp of it was an exclamation, seemed to him not only infinitely desirable, but to be attained without delay. He lounged to his feet, came across to her and lifted her off the branch.

" Kiss me. No, not like that. Properly."

Jean brushed her lips against his eyebrows.

" Well then, improperly."

After a pause, he said : " Will you tell me here and

now what sensible reason you have for not marrying me?"

Jean, flushed, startled and, as usual, moved by Tony's proximity, said: "You haven't any money."

"I can make some."

"That's as optimistic as José's politics."

"How much d'you need?"

"Lots," said Jean. "It's very protective."

The man, who was leaning against a trunk, while she sat on a branch with her feet dangling, looked at her reflectively.

"You take a lot of trouble to make out you're worse than you are and I'd like to know what's at the bottom of it."

Jean flared at him. "Why is it rotten to want money? That is the silliest old prejudice. Men can go and make it if they're not fools, but women can only pretend to do so."

"Good lord," protested Tony, "I thought men were being fairly shoved on the shelf by all you go-get-'em young females."

"All we get," said Jean, "is thirty shillings or three pounds a week. There aren't any women in big business. How many are managers and directors and stockbrokers and bankers and financiers and company-promoters and all the really fat things that lead to millionairedom? We're allowed to earn a living all right, but what woman has ever made a fortune?"

Tony was enjoying the girl's unusual violence. She swung up and down on the branch, declaiming against the rights and privileges of men.

"You think you've got us hoodwinked because we can work all hours for damned little pay and as long as we're inconspicuous, you pat us on the back and

say we're independent, but the only way we can get a real slice of anything is by grabbing it from some man."

"You adorable creature," said Tony, grinning widely. "I wish I'd something for you to grab. As it is, you'll have to put up with the other way round."

He swept her into his arms again and said: "Now tell me seriously, what's it all about?"

"What's what about?" said Jean, returning his kisses.

"What are you afraid of?" He held her by the shoulders and forced her to look at him.

Jean thought of a number of answers she could make. There was no reason at all why she should marry this agreeable young vagabond who treated the map of the world as if it were a counter, but Uruguay was pleasantly far away from everything she most disliked. Still, she'd have to tell him and she didn't want to tell anyone. She flung up her head. It didn't matter, of course. It'd nothing to do with her. But it had mattered dreadfully in England, or had she only imagined it? But there was so little distinction between imagination and reality, except that the former was infinitely more cruel.

"I'm illegitimate," she said, and tried to toss out the words as lightly as the balloons they ought to be, but she couldn't keep the defiance out of her voice.

Tony waited. He was not exceptionally sensitive.

"Well, isn't that enough?" Jean jumped from her branch and shook out her yellow skirts.

"Think of an illegitimate millstone round your neck!" she said as she went into the sunshine.

A capataz, riding past, took off his wide-brimmed felt.

He did it with a flourish, for his blood paid tribute to beauty.

Tony strode after the girl, looking blank. "What are you talking about?" he asked, attempting to stop her rapid progress towards the estancia, but she eluded him.

"Only about my father and mother who ran away together, but just failed to get married before I made my appearance. Silly, don't you think?"

"And you've been worrying about that?"

Jean stopped and looked at him with brows drawn down. "About the fact, not at all. But use your imagination, Tony. Mine's given me enough hell."

"Darling," said the young man rather wildly and caught her arm.

"Not here. It'll upset that cow. She's looking awfully acid. That's how dowagers look at me when they've got sons to protect."

"You utter sweet fool," said Tony all in one word.

"Seriously, don't you mind?"

"Of course not. Why should I? What's it got to do with me?"

"Nothing, of course, but I don't see that's any protection."

Then Tony grew up several years in a minute, for it seemed to him terrible that Jean should be so concerned with defence which was a word for the old and tired. He took her hand very gently and said:

"I do adore you."

The girl thought, I've minded too much. I've been a coward, but it's deep in me now. I don't want anyone to get too near to me. I don't want to be understood. That would be the most hurting thing of all. Aloud she said: "I've got a plan about Jeremy. It's quite

outrageous. I thought of it while you were talking of José Enrique."

His suddenly acquired age must have been of assistance to Tony, for he let her change the conversation, but, as they walked across the bleached paddocks, he continued to hold her hand.

CHAPTER XIII

JEAN had meant to talk to José Enrique after lunch, but having eaten vastly of puchero, the man stretched, yawned and said he was going to sleep.

Doña Maria moved, inevitably, towards the porch. She had spent a large portion of her life in the same chair placed always in the same position. From it, she could look across the purple-headed convolvulus, under which a fence was hidden, to the greenish gold of the camp, unchanging as the hills of Moab, although the foreman read Karl Marx and his children knew more about Lenin than about any biblical character.

Jean followed her. Seated on a carved wooden stool which was very uncomfortable, she asked, " How do the people live up here ? What do they do ? Montevideo seems to me at least the day after to-morrow and here it is much farther back than yesterday."

Doña Maria, to whom the past was far more important than the future, understood what the girl meant. She crossed her feet which were too small for her body, swept a spider off the arm of her chair and began to talk about the camp. Her voice was slow and even and her expression didn't alter. She gazed across the sunlit expanse framed by a jacaranda-tree, as if she saw the scenes she described, and soon Jean began to see them too. " There are no roads," said the old lady, " so the peons are inseparable from their horses. You've seen them riding bareback, or with a recado the

width of a chair. They sleep on it at night when they're in the open. They're happy so long as they have enough meat. We distribute it here to our own people and in the village it sells for less than a penny a pound, so everyone has three good meals a day, a roast in the early morning, a puchero mixed with vegetables at noon, and an asado cooked with the hide at night. On Sundays the men gather at the local store which is stocked with everything from saddles to caged birds. It is a cheerful sight. Customers wear their best corduroy trousers and those very big felt hats bound with leather. Their shirts, bright pink or blue, are stiff as cardboard. The storemen serve them in pyjamas. Rows of horses are hitched to the fence. The old men play cards, the young ones ride races. Sometimes they knife each other because words fail them and a doctor or a coffin is hurried across country in a car like an ancient tin can."

Doña Maria was remembering a number of wakes in the village, at each of which the whole population had turned out as a matter of course to scream or sob beside the corpse for the twenty-four hours the law allowed it to remain unburied, in the intervals of eating, drinking and talking politics. She said : "José must take you to see some of the peons' houses, but they are not like your English cottages." She explained, in practical language, for she was familiar with the business of a great estate, that there was no speculative building outside the towns, so that however high a man's wages —and they were very high compared to the nominal cost of food in the camp—he had to live in the sort of hovel he could build for himself. The walls were blackened mud cubes, held in place by straw instead of mortar, or rusty kerosene-tins beaten flat. They were

thatched or roofed with galvanized iron and they generally contained two rooms, earthen-floored, with a kitchen and sometimes a primitive shower in an outhouse. "Such dwellings must seem to you indescribably squalid," said Doña Maria, stating a fact, but displaying no interest in the girl's reaction to it. "With us families are very large and several generations live together, so there may be twenty people housed in the sort of place I've been describing to you, yet out of those huts on Sundays and holidays come well-dressed girls with higher heels than mine and the latest flesh-coloured stockings, or young men so beautifully starched and tucked and frilled that one imagines a laundress busy for a week over their washing."

Jean said: "One of the things I notice in Montevideo is the extraordinary contrast between working parents and children. On a hot evening, I've often seen a father in crumpled pyjamas and a mother in some shapeless cotton garment, spreading over a seat in front of their house, while the daughters, shingled, waved, manicured, elaborately dressed, look as if they're just about to go on the films."

Doña Maria smiled. "In that class most of the family money is spent on 'giving the girls a chance' and they certainly make the most of it. We're very proud of our children, you know, and not only of our own, but of children in general. They're a form of national insurance. It is nothing to shoot a Deputy, or a Senator, but if you ran over a child by mistake, you might quite well be lynched."

Kay, who had been leaning back as far as she could in an uncompromising chair, with her hands behind her head and her eyes closed, because she didn't want any-

one to know what she was thinking, broke into the conversation with, " In Uruguay everything is inverted. Even democracy began at the top and spread downwards from the landowners to the workers."

Doña Maria said, in decided tones : " The fact is we have the courage to look ahead, whereas in England you walk backwards with your eyes on what's past and finished. Don't you think it's right that youth should make the world it'll have to live in, long after we're gone ? "

But Kay was not in the mood for discussion. She said, " I don't care what happens to the world after I'm dead," and she thought, being old is the same as being dead.

But it was evident that Doña Maria enjoyed being old. In her youth she had travelled a good deal. Most of the European capitals were known to her. She'd read a quantity of books and listened to much music, but for a long time it had seemed to her more agreeable to sit on the porch and think. Jean watched the unrelenting dignity of her face and the eyes, which seemed to be lidless because their gaze never wavered. She wondered what Doña Maria thought of the Laretez family and she said : " Did Don José tell you about the fire ? "

" It was very fortunate it did not reach our land."

" We met your neighbour, Andres Laretez."

" Yes, if there was any danger he would be sure to be there—a most capable man."

" Don José didn't seem to like him very much."

If Kay had made such a remark, she would have been very definitely snubbed, but Doña Maria recognized in the girl certain qualities which Jean didn't know she

possessed. So she said : " Andres is a cousin, distant perhaps, but still of the family," and there was finality in the way she disposed of the conversation.

Shortly afterwards, José came out into the porch, saying he was now ready for anything. Jean, seeing him from a new angle as the efficient and popular owner of an estancia which supported the whole neighbourhood, thought it was unfair that he should be so good-looking as well. Tony, appearing suddenly with ruffled hair, looked immature beside him. " Are you feeling strong ? " said José Enrique to Jean. " What about those shoulders of yours ? " and then to his mother : " She wants to ride the young roan."

Doña Maria protested, " That is not a horse for a woman," but Jean countered with, " The peon who was with us yesterday told me you rode better than any man on the estancia."

Doña Maria allowed herself to relax. " That is a pretty exaggeration, my dear," she protested, but she was pleased. Looking up at her son, she reflected : " I have not been on a horse since you were old enough to ride alone, and that was so short a time after you could walk."

Jean was looking at the old lady's feet which were finely arched. " And you must have danced as well as you rode."

" Ah that ! " said Doña Maria, with a laugh. " For twenty years I danced only with one man and afterwards I did not dance at all."

Kay sat up, startled. She had not thought of Doña Maria in connection with such an affair. Her lips formed the word ' who,' and Doña Maria answered, " But, naturally, he was my husband."

"A husband," said Kay, feeling foolish, "is the one man one should never dance with!"

"There are other things, certainly, one can do with a husband," agreed José Enrique, looking at Jean, but his voice and eyes were friendly.

The girl thought, I must get him alone and make him understand my plan. He's the only person who can help.

Within a few minutes, they were on horseback, proceeding soberly across the smaller paddocks, but José and Tony carried boleadoras.

"It may amuse you to see how we hunt ostriches," said the former, and separating himself from his companions, he whirled the rope into a circle and let it fly out in front of him. The end of it was divided into two thongs, each weighted with a metal ball. "See those bolas," said José, "they spin round the legs of the bird and pull the rope tight."

The roan was snatching at her bit. Jean had as much as she could do to hold her. When, after an hour's riding they came to a stretch of smooth grass sloping towards a bank of trees, the roan put down her head and threw the weight of her great shoulders on the reins. Jean pulled until her arms ached. José was ahead, intent on ostriches. When he caught sight of two birds running, with shabby wings outstretched, he called to Tony and broke into a gallop.

Jean thought, if I let her go I'll never be able to stop her, and she tried to turn the roan towards the trees. For a minute or two they progressed in a series of plunges. Then a comadreja [1] sprang up in front of them. Propelled by its long hind legs and flattened so that its yellowish body seemed a part of the grass, it

[1] A cross between a hare and a deer.

streaked almost under the roan's legs. The mare threw up her head and shied sideways. A stumble on a tussock which hid an armadillo-hole deprived Jean of one stirrup, but the roan recovered and bolted down the paddock.

Jean closed her knees on the saddle and pulled against it, but she was severely shaken. Finding she was hauling on what might've been a block of wood, she flung all her weight on one rein, but the roan had got the bit where she wanted it. She was used to stronger hands than Jean's. With neck outstretched and legs all over the place, she tore towards the trees and each time her quarters came up, rough as a piston thrust, the girl was less steady in the saddle. She still sawed at the reins, but it seemed to her that the sheepskin was slipping and each uneven stride added to her insecurity.

José Enrique had been galloping after the ostriches, his boleadora ready. One of the birds changed its course and as it scuttled over a ridge, he looked over his shoulder and called to Tony. The young man was inextricably confused with the rope, which he'd tried to whirl in the same easy fashion as his host. Behind him, on a bolting horse, Jean was heading straight for the river.

José Enrique wheeled his chestnut on the front legs and drove his spurs home. The colt was used to rounding cattle. He knew as much about riding off, or cutting out, as his master, and he saw the mare in front of him. With ears pricked, he shot into a full gallop and the Uruguayan leaned forward on the recado, his lips a straight line and his eyes steady. The boleadora swung in his right hand, while with the other he held the reins short. If he could get there in time, he'd use

the rope. He'd have to bring down the roan and at this pace it would be dangerous, but Jean would be thrown clear.

With heels and hands, José Enrique urged on the chestnut. He was approaching Jean at a right angle and his horse was the faster, but not the heavier. He doubted if he could turn the roan, although, if he went right into her, he could bring them both down. No, it'd have to be the rope. He was gaining. He moved his right arm and then the chestnut put a hind foot into a hole, checked, recovered with a plunge and went on, less steadily.

José Enrique touched the colt's flanks and he responded gamely, but they'd lost a few lengths. Jean was within a hundred yards of the river ; straight in front of her there was a wide gap among the trees and a thirty-foot drop to the shallows.

José threw away the rope and gripped his revenche. The chestnut responded. At this rate they'd meet head to neck and go down together. José called to the girl. His voice was cool and unhurried. " Drop your left rein. It's all right. Now then, put all your weight on the other."

Jean obeyed. It was the right stirrup which was missing, but she didn't lack nerve. Inch by inch, the roan's head came round, but it didn't affect her headlong gallop. By this time, she didn't know what she was doing. Her eyes were bloodshot and her nostrils wide.

Jean, aware at last of what lay in front of her, set her teeth and flung her body backwards, so that what weight it had came on the right rein. The roan yielded a little, but they were only a few yards from the drop. As it rushed at them, so near that Jean heard the soft

ripple of the water, saw the stones in the nearest pool, José Enrique drove straight across her. His revenche cut the mare on the neck. She shied blindly from the whip and the Uruguayan caught her bridle. For a second, the two animals plunged and swayed on the edge of the cliff. Then there was a sharp slither of earth and small stones. Jean saw what was happening and screamed.

The roan staggered sideways. The chestnut, whose weight had been flung against her, riding her off, while his rider dragged at the bridle, felt his legs slipping. He squealed and flung up his head. Agile as a cat he scrambled for firmer ground, but the roan was still boring against him. The earth cracked under his hoofs.

José had dropped the reins and was leaning right off the recado, with his left foot out of the stirrup and both hands at the mare's cheek-bar. When he felt the chestnut slipping, he levered his powerful body out of the saddle, kicked his right foot free and clung to his hold on Jean's bridle. There was a rush of earth and a last desperate struggle before the colt disappeared.

Jean, holding to one rein, her knees bruised against the saddle rolls, from which the sheepskin had gone, saw the thing happen, felt the mare slide towards the broken edge, with José dragged beside her. She saw the man disappear under the roan's head and felt him trampled by her hoofs. She clung, dazed and inert, to whatever offered a grip until he called to her. "Get off, can't you. Get off!"

Then she realized it was over. The mare stood, with head drooping and nostrils wide. Beside her, with a hand still on the cheek-bar, José was staggering to his

feet. There was a cut across his forehead. His shirt was torn and stained. He moved stiffly, dragging one leg, but he spoke soothingly to the mare and put his hand gently against her nostrils.

CHAPTER XIV

"WHEN a man's saved your life," said Tony, "you can ask him for anything you like." He spoke with forced lightness, because he felt that as long as he lived, he'd never be able to forget the moment when he realized Jean's danger and his own helplessness. He'd done everything he could—ridden like mad while still mixed up with the boleadora and nearly roped his own horse in consequence, but he'd arrived too late to do anything but hold the roan, while José limped down the cliff to see what had happened to the colt.

"That's an odd way of putting it," said Jean.

They were leaning on the fence where it broke through the quilt of convolvulus. It was late in the evening. Frogs croaked in the ditch which led to an artificial pool. The cicalas were busy. A bat flickered out of the pepper-tree.

Tony said : "It was the best bit of riding I've ever seen. If I were a Uruguayan, I'd be an Altruista right away." The fair young man thought horses were much more important than politics, although he was interested in the local conception of Utopia. He wondered if he'd said enough, or too much. Hang it! José Enrique had all the luck.

At that moment the tall figure of their host came out of the porch, where a tame toad was searching for beetles.

"Well, here he is. Go to it!" said Tony, and moved towards the house.

The Uruguayan had a strip of plaster across his forehead. Otherwise he presented his normal appearance.

"Have you been round to the stable?" asked Jean, anxious about the fate of the chestnut colt.

"Yes."

"Well?"

"I'm afraid it's no good. Tejera's had a look at him. There's no doubt something went in his back. It was extraordinary that he could move at all."

Jean's eyes smarted. She blinked hastily, but was not very sure of her voice as she said: "He was such a gallant horse. The way he came into me was splendid —I'd be dead, now, if he hadn't done his damnedest." She felt she was talking like Sally.

"He did a good job," said José with understanding, "and he's not in any pain." This was literally true, for the chestnut had a bullet in his brain. "It was my fault," continued José, "I shouldn't've let you ride the mare, although I've never seen her get the wind up like that."

He was still concerned with his English, so that his language swung between extremes of style, but his exuberance was gone. He regretted the loss of a good horse and he'd been shaken by Jean's danger. Standing beside her, in the silvery diffusion of star-shine which was the nearest to darkness that a clear night in the camp could provide, he was stirred by an unusual intensity of feeling.

Like most Latins, José Enrique had loved woman in the abstract as well as a certain number of women, but

he had never regarded his affairs as being of vital importance to his life. Some day, of course, he would marry, but that would be a family matter. Meanwhile he had entertained himself wherever opportunity offered. At first, he had been intrigued by Jean's manner which went so oddly with the diffidence of her eyes and lips, but he'd very soon discovered the limit of her assurance. To his mind, she was a child, playing with sophistication, and as such, she roused in him the same instincts that sent him headlong into the political arena—a dreamer, dreaming greatly, who, in full possession of the promised land, for Uruguay is a potential if not an actual Eden, would fight for a still more arresting condition, which should supply not only milk and honey, strictly national, but happiness and morality, State-controlled with wages, employment, fuel, transport, light and building materials.

José was troubled, for his party was in difficulties. The President in office was possessed of strength and determination. He was sufficiently broad-minded to appreciate the necessity for conciliating foreign capital and he was no partisan of idealistic legislation that would alienate the business interests from which the country drew a large proportion of its revenue. Lately, the Altruistas had failed to pass a number of laws destined to penalize the capitalist in favour of the worker. There had been councils of desperation, in which the more extreme demanded a revolution, for, although Uruguay prides itself on being a modern social experiment, it is sufficiently young to regard force as the deciding factor in any struggle. Consequently, the President's suppression of the newspaper which served as the political organ of his opponents, had been

followed by extravagant rumours. There were bands forming on the Brazilian frontier. The Altruistas were accused of having planned to seize the capital. In the National Assembly, where they had a majority, wild speeches were made and the dramatic arrest of José Enrique roused his party to further activity. It was generally felt that some sort of clash was imminent.

Leaning on a post which would soon be smothered by the lusty growth of convolvulus, the Uruguayan looked at the girl beside him and wished vaguely that she were his wife. He wanted to confide in someone. Doña Maria was too unyielding. Had she been beside him in the car when he'd shot the policeman and been eventually overwhelmed by gas-bombs, she would have ignored the whole situation. He could imagine her, stiff and unperturbed, with level brows, treating bullets as locusts, but indicating by her very lack of expression that they were out of place. Jean was sensitive and where her loyalty was concerned, she would be passionately responsive. José Enrique had more knowledge of the girl than she would willingly have conceded to any man.

But, even while he replied to her questions about the chestnut and thought of her as being quite different to any other woman he'd known, so that, at the moment, he required from her a mental rather than a physical intimacy, his mind was concerned with the President. How far would the man go? How much of the country was behind him? José Enrique knew how his compatriots responded to drama. Supposing the President closed the National Assembly and by so doing, turned the limelight full on himself? The Uruguayan was computing how many strictly con-

stitutional governments were left in South America, or for that matter, in Europe as well, when Jean disturbed his thoughts.

"I want you to do something to help me," she said. Her voice held the note that the Uruguayan had imagined, but not yet heard in it. In truth, Jean was considerably moved both by the man's presence and by what had happened that afternoon. Tony had receded into the distance, partly because at no moment had he succeeded in making the girl feel she was necessary to him, whereas José, without saying anything at all, had induced in her a sensation of mutual understanding that might at any moment become something surprisingly important.

"*Como no!*" said the Uruguayan, and dismissed the President from his mind.

"Well then, you know Señor Bosco, who owns the estancia where Jeremy Ingworth is Manager?"

"Yes," said José, surprised, for in his unexpected reaction to the girl's presence, he'd forgotten the original reason for it.

"Oh, don't you remember what I told you at Carrasco! We've got to prevent Jeremy going over to Buenos Aires, because, if Kay goes with him, they'll neither of them come back."

"What d'you want me to do?"

"Telephone to Señor Bosco. You can, can't you? Get him over here on any pretext you like and keep him here. Then, don't you see, Jeremy will have no excuse to leave the estancia. In fact, he won't be able to do so without losing his job."

José smiled at her in a very friendly fashion and Jean caught hold of his arm with both her hands. "I haven't thanked you for this afternoon—it's impossible

to thank you for that ! And now I'm asking something else, but you will do it, won't you ? "

She had never made such an appeal to any man, but, momentarily, she was aware of a link between them. Both were tilting at windmills.

José said : " I will telephone if you like, although I haven't the least idea if I shall succeed, but don't you think it's insufferably interfering ? "

There was no sting in his words and Jean accepted them at their face value. " Did you think it was interfering when you pulled me up on the top of the cliff ? Kay's riding for a worse fall, but that I agree is her own business. I'm concerned with all the others it's going to hurt."

Jean thought, what can they do with so many years between them ? To her, Kay was definitely middle-aged.

José laughed. It amused him to be involved in such a trivial plot, when the fate of his country was at stake. He hesitated, wondering if he should kiss the girl, but he wanted more from her now than kisses. Things were bound to come to a head over the minimum wage bill. When the crisis was over, he'd talk to his mother. It would be exciting to have Jean in his life. She wouldn't give him twelve children, but she'd be something of a person when she lowered her guard. He said : " You know, it won't do any good at all, for if they want each other enough, they'll find some other way. You can only postpone the crash. Much better get it over." He thought Kay was very attractive and it didn't seem to him to matter how many young men lost their heads-over her. These things were not serious unless the woman chose to make them so.

The result of this conversation was that when the four who were very much concerned with themselves and their personal relationships returned to the Extraordinary House, there was a note for Kay on the chest in the hall. George was at his wife's elbow as she picked it up, but as soon as she'd read the first words, she went rapidly upstairs and every one of them could hear her locking herself into her room.

" What's the matter ? " asked Mrs. Wraxendon, with an effort to recover the manners of a hostess. She had passed a pleasant few days doing nothing at all and she felt as if she'd been fully occupied with important affairs.

Agnes had always been possessed of wit, courage and kindness and it was not unusual for her to be called upon to display all three qualities at once. But when George, his face livid and his eyes apparently blind, stumbled towards the stairs, hesitated while, with a violent gesture in front of him, he brushed away something that wasn't there, she found all her qualities concentrated in the need for immediate action. There was a revenche hanging on the newel-post. In this house there always was a revenche. Agnes felt a decided distaste for the rawhide on which George's hand had closed. She also felt that a scene in which she'd already taken part, was being unnecessarily re-enacted.

Moving quickly, but without any suggestion of hurry, she reached the bottom stair as George left it. " Why the whip, Mr. Strang ? " she asked in a voice admirably modulated between amusement and surprise.

George swung round, his face working. " I didn't

know—I'm sorry," he said, looking blankly at the thing he held.

" Give Kay time to unpack," suggested Agnes. " I want you to make cocktails—Tony is quite hopeless." She stood there, cool and very certain of herself, for it didn't occur to her that the man could refuse.

George wavered. He made another curious gesture and said, " It was later, wasn't it? " and then, " I don't know what's the matter with me."

" You'll be better when you've had a cocktail," said Agnes, who was proud of her palate and detested mixed drinks.

The curtain rings rattled as she led the way into the sitting-room. The hangings swelled, so that it looked as if someone passed behind them. " We've had a lot of wind," said Mrs. Wraxendon in a conversational voice, " but I rather like it. On a still day the house is desolate."

There was, at the moment, no suggestion of stillness. The windows were all open and through them came the sibilant whisper of the eucalyptus whose leaves were flails, the rougher and richer murmur of pines, the recurrent flick of an oleander branch against the wall and a medley of sound where the palm threshed its stiff and crackly leaves against the stirred wildness of the willows. The wind gathered force. It took hold of the house and assailed it with a tumult of speech so that only Jean and Tony heard footsteps descending the stairs. Neither had time to do anything before the door closed, so quietly that they wondered if they'd imagined the sound.

In the lane Kay was battling against a drift of sand which swept up from the beach. The wind shrieked

round her head and tore at the dark coat which she hadn't troubled to fasten. The surface of the earth was lost under a rush of sand. It was like walking through a tide. By the time she reached the comparative shelter of the gum-trees in which there was a gypsy encampment, she felt as if a hundred hands were tearing at her skirts and an equal number of confused voices expostulating in her ears.

Jeremy was waiting. He came to her, lean and soft-footed, and when his arms closed round her she forgot the nervous misery of the last few days. Her indecision was gone. She relaxed against his shoulder.

"You got my note—of course, or you wouldn't be here. It's so difficult to think when I just want to go on kissing you."

"What on earth's made that infernal Bosco man decide to come over?"

"I don't know," said Jeremy, content with the moment.

Kay felt that they ought to make plans. She could face George more easily with the consciousness of a settled plan, but with the strong sweet scent of the gums in her nostrils and Jeremy's arms tightening, she could only savour to the full a moment that had broken loose, so that for them neither time nor space existed.

They wandered farther into the wood, beyond reach of the sounds which came from a mud hut. Firelight and aromatic smoke followed them. A horse moved in the reddened dusk. The trees were proud beggars, with skin showing under their rags. Kay put out a hand and touched the stripped bark. She wanted to see if it was real.

After a while there was no more light. The wind had dropped to a whisper. Under their feet the earth was deeply cushioned. "Let's sit here," said Jeremy. He felt vaguely for his cigarette-case, but, leaning against a trunk with Kay in his arms, he forgot to smoke. For a long time they didn't even talk.

CHAPTER XV

WHEN Kay returned to the house, walking slowly, her eyes very bright and her lips parted, she was surprised to find it in darkness. The shutters were closed. She hesitated with a finger on the bell. Perhaps they'd gone to the hotel, or to that little wooden restaurant under the pines. Kay was no coward. She pressed the bell with decision, but was relieved when Jean, instead of George, opened the door. She'd imagined her husband keeping vigil in the hall and had been prepared to apply her restored common sense to the situation, which she was determined should not get out of hand. "Where are the others?" she asked, taking off her coat and feeling the concurrence of the house which had known all that she sought.

"Dining, I suppose," said Jean. "D'you want to join them for coffee?"

The girl tried to keep her voice free of antagonism, but there'd been difficult moments when George, who could no longer be prevented from going upstairs, since it was necessary for him to wash and change, had rushed down, half out of his senses and announced, "She's gone!"

Mrs. Wraxendon had risen to the situation. "To the Casino, I suppose. Your wife will win you a fortune if you don't take care, and then you'll have to live here for ever, for you won't be able to get it out of the country."

By force of will, allied to her fixed determination to see nothing unusual in the behaviour of her guests, Agnes Wraxendon had fairly driven George into suitable clothes, after which she had required his immediate escort in the direction of the nearest food, of which she declared there was none in the house. Tony had been forced to accompany them, in deference to a small, fierce voice, not at all like Jean's, which had insisted, "You can't let her go through with it alone?"

"D'you suppose she's coming back?" the man had countered.

"Yes, of course, and I'm going to be with her when George begins his scene."

Kay, standing under the light, was ice and earth combined. She stared at Jean as if she'd never seen her before and said: "No. I'm going to bed."

Her manner was as far from encouraging as it could possibly be, but Jean had been strengthened in her purpose, both by José Enrique's opposition and by her belief that in matters which were to him equally important, he would follow as direct a course. She said: "I want to talk to you, please."

Kay turned with a foot on the bottom step. "Now, particularly?" she queried and, with her experience, she was able to make the girl's request sound ridiculous.

But Jean was not to be so easily dismissed. She stood still and said: "I wanted to talk to you before we went up to the estancia, but then it was only about Sally. I'm sure she's the person who matters most, but we all thought when George started up to your room with a revenche in his hand that you might come off rather badly." There! It was said and she'd no longer any control of it. Jean didn't know whether she was relieved, or appalled.

Kay, leaning negligently against the wall, remarked without hostility, "You are unnecessarily dramatic."

"So is this house. It's robbed us of our ordinary characters. Can you imagine George in the rôle of executioner? Can you see yourself—the self who put up such a good fight in London, taking Sally's husband just for fun? For even you, wonderful as you are, can't make anything of it. You won't want to, once you're free of this place."

"You've thought it all out," said Kay. She was quite cool. All words seemed to her superfluous.

Jean scarcely noticed the interruption. She was pursuing her own ideas. "Can you imagine me having the courage—or the impertinence if you like—to say this to you? I'm generally sick with fright lest anyone should even disapprove of me. We're none of us normal, Kay. Do take that into consideration."

Jean came forward till she was within a yard of the woman whom she would've liked to have regarded as an adversary, but the other looked at her with a grave pity and her manner was singularly disarming.

"I can't discuss the matter with you, or anyone else," said Kay. After a pause she continued. "If the house is doing anything to us it's all to the good. We're ten times more alive than when we got off the boat. Besides, it's never any good interfering in the long run, nobody can help, or hurt anyone else. I couldn't take Jeremy from Sally if he really belonged to her. And I don't want any help with George. He's my husband. Whatever happens is our own affair."

She began to move up the stairs and Jean was conscious of an extraordinary lassitude. She hadn't done any good. She could think of nothing more to say.

Kay turned at the top of the first flight. "Have you thought," she asked in a detached voice, "whether José Enrique is likely to take you from Tony?" Then she continued her leisurely progress and Jean was left in the hall, feeling inadequate and quite detestably young.

Kay paused at the door of Mrs. Wraxendon's room to speak to Lida, who was replacing some clothes in a cupboard. For all her appearance of calm the Englishwoman had difficulty in collecting her thoughts. There was something ordinary and domestic that she ought to say to the half-Indian, but she couldn't remember what it was. Something to do with washing, she thought.

Lida broke into a flood of Spanish, nodding her head and gesticulating as if to indicate the immediate approach of somebody who would explain.

Kay, with her mind full of Jeremy, looked at her blankly for a moment and then went on down the passage. In her own room she conceived a sudden distaste for the clothes she'd worn all day. She took them off and left them in a heap on the floor. With an old Spanish shawl wound round her body she went to the window and opened it. She hadn't turned on the light, for the greyness, in which the furniture acquired unusual shapes, was reminiscent of the eucalyptus wood where she and Jeremy had forgotten time. Leaning on the sill, she took deep breaths of the sweetness which drifted up from the garden. The night was an accomplice. The wind caressed her shoulders and passed.

For how long she remained there, staring at a sky which was nebulous and far away, so that the stars seemed to be drifting in a fine, silver mesh, she didn't

know, but, at last, a sound at the door disturbed her. She turned as it opened and was conscious of fear.

On the threshold stood an unfamiliar figure in a shapeless cotton dress. Kay, with her breath tearing her throat, forced herself to move and immediately the woman cried out and dropped the thing she held. There was a moment in which it seemed to Kay it would be fatal to turn on the light. Then her sense sharpened. With steady fingers she pressed the switch. The room sprang into focus. The old woman, leaning against the wall with one hand fumbling at an amulet she wore round her neck, screamed "Doña Elena" after which she remained immobile with her mouth dropping open and her eyes shut.

It was some time afterwards that Kay realized how surprised she ought to have been. At the moment the thin shriek excited her so that the blood began to pound through her veins and her voice deepened as she asked, "What d'you mean? Who are you?"

Simultaneously, she realized that it must be the washerwoman who came like a ghost after dusk and went away with a bundle of clothes slung in a sheet. "Come in," she said, and as the other didn't move she crossed swiftly to the door and shut it.

The woman was dark as the native mahogany and twisted by age. Instead of the redundant flesh into which her compatriots slip comfortably after their thirtieth year, she had sharply-cut bones and claws of wrinkles, where the skin pouched round her eyes and lips. As Kay approached, she shrank away along the wall, but curiosity made her open her eyes. They widened and their fixed stare suggested they were looking at something beyond the immediate present.

"It's her shawl! How should I not know it?" said the woman and stretched out a shrunken hand.

"It's my own," said Kay briskly, but the woman took no notice. She was fingering the faded silk, and, while her face remained rigid, her fingers moved delicately over the embroidery. "There should be blood on it," she whispered.

Then Kay dragged the shawl out of her hand. "What d'you know about it?" she asked under her breath, and even then it seemed to her that her Spanish was unusually fluent.

The Indian woman slid forward, as if she were in a trance. "How should I not know?" she repeated. "With Doña Elena I came to this house and for sixteen years I slept above this room which was hers. Nothing happened in it that I did not hear." She paused. "I was her maid, yes, but I was also her foster-mother. How strange that she should be here now and yet so far away."

Kay's flesh prickled. She didn't at all like the sensation that was creeping down her spine. It was horribly suggestive of paralysis. In another moment she wouldn't be able to move.

The solitary electric bulb, shaded with a scarf, gave very little light. The dark, expressionless face which seemed to hang above a sack, might, at any moment, reveal something too terrible to contemplate.

Yet Kay said, "Well, what did you hear?" and was relieved to find her voice steady.

The Indian made a movement with her right hand. It was as if a whip rose and fell. "I heard her cry and scream," she said. "I heard strange sounds——" She came to an abrupt stop.

With a tremendous effort Kay dragged her feet

across the boards. She caught the woman's arm and was surprised to find it material under her fingers. "What did you mean about blood on her shawl?"

The washerwoman's face had crumpled. It was like the rind of a last year's gourd. She passed her tongue across her lips and her eyes became shrewd. "Every day there were marks on her flesh," she said; "but what man does not beat the woman he loves! In the camp no wife considers her husband until she's seen him use his knife on an enemy and felt his blows across her shoulders."

"It wasn't that," said Kay, fumbling now for words. "Tell me the truth."

The woman looked as if she wanted to go, but couldn't. Fascinated, she stared at the figure outlined by the lime-green silk and her hand made tentative gestures towards it. "Santa Maria," she murmured, and the words of a prayer were jumbled on her lips. "There is something fated! You look like her and you are in her room and you wear her shawl. You lean out of the window in the dark like she did——" The Indian broke into a dialect, but it was easy enough to understand that she was terrified of what would happen next.

"Was Elena afraid of her husband?" asked Kay, remembering her conversation with Doña Maria. She was determined to get to the bottom of the mystery, with which she felt herself involuntarily connected, but the Indian was on her guard. "Why should she be?"

"He was cruel to her. You've said so yourself."

A strange smile disturbed the old woman's wrinkles. "There are more ways of love than you understand."

The accent rather than the words made Kay realize

the Indian contempt for a foreigner, but she insisted. "Did she love him? How could she love him?"

The washerwoman seemed to be looking back a long way. Her eyes were wise and tired. She nodded her head. "Yes. Of truth, she loved him."

It was a statement of fact, simple and convincing, and it left Kay bewildered. The story was too full of contradictions. There was something hidden which would alter the whole perspective. In a thoroughly practical voice she asked, "What happened to Don Fernando?" but the Indian had bent to pick up the clothes she'd dropped. When she rose, stiffly, with her arms full of coloured linen, she shrugged her shoulders and her face was not so much blank as stupid.

"Who knows but he went on some journey?" she said.

And then a man's footsteps sounded on the stairs. They came slowly down the passage. The old woman's expression did not change, but she stiffened into complete rigidity and stood there waiting.

She knows what's going to happen, thought Kay. Her eyes were on the door. As the footsteps drew nearer, hesitating for the fraction of a moment out of sight, a cry broke from the Indian's lips.

It was this sound, or the ghost of a sound he'd heard before that brought George to his senses. He'd been in the devil of a mood so that he hardly recognized himself, let alone anyone else. The evening had dragged through an unending succession of minutes that might as well have been hours. When at last he escaped the watchfulness of his companions his feet took him, automatically, towards the Extraordinary House. He'd got to get back to Kay. He'd got to

have it out with her. Brooding over what he would say, he'd come up the stairs, knowing only that there was a light in her room. But the cry pulled him out of his stupor. It reminded him of something he'd heard long ago and half-forgotten, or had he only imagined it? Overcoming his momentary hesitation he hurried into Kay's room, and there was his wife in the shawl he'd sold his best pony to give her. Beside her was a shrivelled old woman who seemed to be three parts out of her senses and whose eyes wandered round as if she expected somebody else. There was a moment's silence. Then the Indian, with the newly-ironed clothes clutched to her bosom, brushed passed George and went out.

"What did she mean?" asked the man, for he'd caught a few words.

"I don't know," said Kay, "I didn't hear." She was weary of the old drama, inexplicably reflected in the mirror of their own lives. She drew the shawl tighter and said: "It's always the same thing. They think I'm Elena and they go stark staring off their heads. That wouldn't matter if it weren't catching. But, I can assure you, Jean fully expects you to murder someone by way of keeping up with the Duke."

"He wasn't the husband," said George, shortly.

"No. That ought to make a difference. What d'you feel about it yourself?" Kay seated herself in an isolated chair and lit a cigarette.

George contemplated her with an anxiety which was the more pitiful for being controlled. He was glad the old Indian had been in the room. Her presence had given him a moment in which to pull himself together. The violent emotions with which he'd been contending all the evening had given way to a dull misery. He

might as well know the worst. "What's up between you and Jeremy Ingworth?" he asked.

"I don't know yet," said Kay, without hesitation. She hadn't the least desire to talk about the feelings which were still far too new and precious to bear analysis.

"How d'you mean, you don't know? You must know," insisted George, who always knew exactly what he felt, however unusual the circumstances.

"Well, I don't," said Kay, and then she made an effort to prevent the conversation becoming what she'd often contemptuously referred to as marital. "I'll tell you as soon as I'm quite sure, but don't let's wreck everything until I am."

George simply stared at her. It was inconceivable that she should be in love with that boy who was years too young for her, and what about Sally? The man's thoughts were not particularly clear. It seemed to him they were obscured by a hot and suffocating haze. He couldn't remember another occasion on which he'd been so desperately muddle-headed. It was as if he were two people at the same time. One of them urged him to the most extravagant actions, wholly out of keeping with his nature. He supposed it was the effect of the wind which never left him alone. It was always blowing off his hat, or blurring his glasses with sand, so that he considered it a personal enemy with whom he could never get to grips. Without answering his wife, who was leaning forward in her chair, very much in earnest and attempting also to be sensible and fair, he crossed to the window and shut it violently. "I don't know what's the matter with this house," he said. "It must be full of holes. Listen now! There's half a dozen draughts blowing right through here."

Certainly the room was far from silent. The curtains shook against the windows and a blanket hanging over the bed slid slowly on to the floor.

"It's probably not very well built and on sand," said Kay, determinedly practical, although she felt the room breathing while the rest of the house gathered to whisper outside the door.

George returned to the subject she would so gladly have dismissed. "Have you got it into your head that you're in love with the fellow?" he asked.

"I'm in love with something," returned Kay. "If you insist on talking about it now it'll be with Jeremy." And she wondered why she didn't tell him the truth straight away. It would hurt him less than to find it out bit by bit.

George said: "I can't believe it. We've been too much to each other."

"Perhaps that's it. We've been awfully concentrated."

George asked: "What've I done?" and such simplicity appealed to Kay.

"Nothing," she said. Then she got up and moved restlessly about the room. "When I came here I was content with middle age and memories. Now I want something more. I must have it." She thought of Jeremy as youth and ecstasy and anguish. She'd got to go through all the uncertainties of passion over again. She said: "I don't know if I'll want to keep it? Is that any comfort to you?"

George became awkward and inarticulate, for Kay had often made mock of the old-fashioned words which came easiest to his lips, but he could think of no others. "If you mean, can I stand your having an affair with this chap and coming back to me, no. I can't. I'll

never be able to do without you. You know it. But it wouldn't ever be the same if you were unfaithful."

Kay's expressive lips twisted into a grimace, but she forbore to comment on her husband's language. Instead, she stood in front of him and said : " In all the years of our marriage we've never had a scene. It's too late now for either of us to be melodramatic. We've always talked things over——"

" There's never been anything like this," interrupted George.

Kay's teeth bit into the end of the holder through which she was smoking. Her nerves were on edge. First Jean, then that insane old woman and now George ! It seemed as if everyone was against her, but she wouldn't give way to their theatrical instincts. The situation was perfectly simple, and she wasn't going to have any more drama. She said : " Look here, it's quite unnecessary for me to tell you how sorry I am, because you must know perfectly well I wouldn't hurt you if I could possibly help it. Nothing between us has changed. Surely you understand that ? But something's happened to me and it's got to run its course——" Kay contrived a smile, but she was dead-tired. " Won't you have patience ? If you can bear to wait it may be all right. I don't know now, but I swear I'll tell you as soon as I'm sure."

It seemed to Kay essential to gain time, but she didn't know for what. Perhaps, she thought, with a return to the superstition engendered by the house and strengthened by the washerwoman's behaviour, the scene was not yet set.

For a moment she forgot her own perplexities and remembered that this room held the key to the Laretez story. In it Fernando had almost certainly been

killed. The chair in which she sat had been a witness of his death. Every piece of furniture had known about the relations between Elena and her husband. There was no mystery so far as this room was concerned. It knew the truth. Kay wondered if stains had been washed out of the rug beside the bed, if the boards had been scraped and repolished. Then her thoughts swung back to George, who, with enforced calm, was arguing in the usual useless fashion. Kay felt that every Anglo-Saxon husband must, at some time or other, have said the same things. He talked appreciatively of the past, with which she had no longer anything in common. He spoke of jeopardizing a future which didn't exist. Finally, he said with diffidence : " The boy can't be more than twenty-five. Have you thought about that? He isn't very clever, is he? You'd be sick of him within a few weeks."

Kay was grateful for the way he put it, but she had to make him understand, so she said : " You speak as if I were choosing to run away with Jeremy, but it isn't that at all. He's just happened to me like an accident and I can't help it." Her voice rose in spite of her determination that there should be no scene.

George's spectacles were giving him trouble. He could hardly see through them, but he wouldn't take them off. " Look here," he said with a sound that was not unlike a sniff, " let's clear out of this place. I feel rotten and you're not yourself at all. You say you want time. All right, but let's get away where you can think it over. You owe me that, Kay."

" Why ? " asked the woman, surprised. It was odd how husbands and wives computed their mutual debts. The thought of a matrimonial ledger was distasteful to her.

But George was so keen on his plan he didn't notice her query. "Once we're out of this house things'll be quite different," he urged. The house was an organ and each room a pipe through which the wind carried a varying volume of sound. Kay spoke above the crescendo, "If I leave this house it'll be with Jeremy." Then, in a gentler tone she said: "It's no use running away. The solution is here. Don't you feel it?"

George hesitated. Blinding rage swept over him. He felt all that was really himself, on which he could depend, submerged in a tide over which he'd no control.

Seeing her husband standing there, apparently deprived of speech, Kay ventured, "I'm so tired. We've said everything. Let's get some sleep."

With a strangled sound George turned and wrenched the door open. He was terrified as he'd never been in his life. Panting, he flung himself into the passage and banged the door behind him. He hoped to God Kay would lock it, but she didn't.

Leaning against the wall, with his heart pounding and his ears singing, George pulled off his spectacles and in the middle of wiping them, was nearly driven back into his wife's room. What the devil was the matter with him? Was he going off his head?

With his spectacles in his hand he blundered down the passage and nearly fell over Jean who was seated, inconspicuously, on the floor. "What the hell——" he exclaimed and was interrupted, "Yes, I know, I'm so sorry. It *was* odd——"

Jean scrambled to her feet. George replaced his glasses. They stared at each other. Jean was very white. "Will you have a drink?" she asked.

"There's some beer in the ice-box, or I expect I can find the whiskey."

George looked at her aghast. "I don't want a drink," he said, and then, with a hand at his collar, "But I'm not going back to Kay, if that's what you mean."

Their eyes met. "I'm so sorry," repeated the girl.

"You'd better get to bed," said George. "I'm all in myself," and he went heavily to his room.

CHAPTER XVI

AFTER such a night it was not surprising that none of the occupants of the Extraordinary House were inclined for an early breakfast. Tony was the first up and it was he who brought to Jean the news that another tragedy was impending. Thumping on the frail panels of her door with sufficient vigour to waken the whole house, he called through them: "I say, there's only about a drop and a half of water. If you want a bath you'd better grab one quick."

One after another, Mrs. Wraxendon and her guests discovered that they were about to pay for cloudless skies.

Lida explained to her mistress. "It is the drought, they say, like it was so many years ago. The man from the Water Works he came yesterday and say 'be careful.' There is still some water for drinking, yes; but for the washing, none to waste."

Agnes did not allow the news to spoil her excellent coffee, nor did she curtail her morning ablutions although the trickle which emerged from the bath-taps changed them from a pleasure to a duty. Subsequently, finding that George and Kay had sequestrated themselves among the crowds on the beach, she took counsel with Tony whose Spanish was the kind the gardener understood. "We'll have to ration ourselves indoors," she said. "And, after all, the River Plate

provides a large enough bath at the end of the lane. But I can't bear to lose my flowers."

Agnes Wraxendon's sense of possession was limited to a garden. Strolling out of the house, followed by Tony, she regarded with satisfaction the heavy-headed roses, the dahlias and the blatant scarlet of the hibiscus. "The seasons are all mixed up here," she said. "It is delightful. One doesn't have to wait for anything."

And then the gardener burst upon them with a useless hose and a great flow of language. Agnes gave him her whole attention, while she played her usual game of trying to pick out one word in a dozen. If she succeeded, she felt she'd held her own. If they made sense, she'd won. But Tony disturbed her concentration with the news that if the garden was to be kept going it must be with whatever surface water they could find. "The works have cut down supplies," he said, "and there's no sign of rain. Let's have a look at that well."

He indicated the picturesque structure surrounded by majolica tiling and surmounted by an arch that had taken Jean's fancy when she first saw it.

The wind in the plane-trees snapped and cracked as they went across the grass. The eucalyptus, laden now with a mass of silver-blue berries, tossed their branches in a frenzy of excitement. The air was so clear that there was scarcely any contrast between light and shade. Mrs. Wraxendon said: "I'm beginning to feel very dry, aren't you?"

Sand drifted in from the lane with an arid rustling. The acacia-leaves were twisted and tipped with yellow.

Tony laughed. "I dare say we'll get something out of the well, though Juan, here, says it's full of old cans."

Leaning on the whitewashed wall they peered into the depths. "I can't see anything at all," said Agnes.

"Nothing liquid," agreed Tony; "but we'd better have a shot at digging it out. There's water all over the place if one can get down to it."

"Brackish?" asked Agnes.

"I don't suppose your flowers will mind."

Everyone agreed that flowers were a speciality of Mrs. Wraxendon's. She had a way with them and they responded. At home she had achieved horticultural miracles in defiance of Kew and the English climate. She said briskly: "Well, I don't suppose there's any immediate hurry, but will you arrange for the digging? And now, if you want to take Jean over to see Mrs. Ingworth, you'd better start, as I'd like the car later to go into Montevideo."

"Right you are," said Tony. "I'll drop Jean and do a José Enrique stunt back to you."

So it happened that once again the youngest of Agnes Wraxendon's guests drove together along the highly-polished macadam which slipped between the Snipe's wheels like a strip of oiled silk. And Tony said: "I suppose it's no good repeating that I want to marry you?" And Jean, disturbed because he'd so quickly guessed what she imagined was her own secret, retorted with, "It never was any good."

Then, of course, she relented. "Nothing's any different. It's just that I don't want to marry."

Tony stared at the road, empty of traffic, except for a tinker's cart and asked: "D'you think I'm as blind as an owl?"

Jean maintained a dignified silence.

After a while Tony said: "What was the fellow telephoning about this morning?"

"Politics," retorted the girl, delighted with the opportunity, but her satisfaction diminished when her companion didn't ask for an explanation. It was annoying to have to vouchsafe, "There's a party congress to-night and I wanted to go. José said it was only for men, which is pretty archaic, but now it seems I can hide in a box with Doña Maria."

"Well, you'll have some fireworks, all right," said Tony, turning into the mud lane. "Oratory to these people is a physical pleasure. They get drunk on their own eloquence."

As the Humber-Snipe slid over ruts and hummocks he became interested in the subject. "You know its speech which is responsible for half the tragedies out here. A politician says so much when he's all worked up that there's nothing left for him but a *coup d'état*, or a revolution. If they had capital punishment in Uruguay I'm sure the condemned would be allowed to make a last speech before execution instead of choosing whatever he likes for breakfast. His own words would have a much more inspiring effect on him than any amount of eggs and bacon."

Jean was mildly surprised by Tony's willingness to relinquish a subject of personal interest in favour of the national psychology. She glanced at him sideways and thought his well-brushed fairness was extremely pleasant. He was the sort of man who looked well in old flannels. But her thoughts were divided between Sally and José Enrique. For a moment she attempted to analyse the attraction of the Uruguayan. He represented, of course, a complete break with the past which had made her feel like a hedgehog. Here nobody knew anything about her. The absence of the usual prefix which infuriated Lady Templedown so

that, whenever she saw an envelope addressed to her daughter, she felt intimately insulted, would pass unnoticed in Uruguay. There would be no more "This is Jean," uttered defiantly by her mother and with protective pity by her father, with the rest left to the other person's tact.

In Uruguay there was no such thing as illegitimacy. All sorts of children had equal rights, and when a man died it was not unusual for his heritage to be disputed by twenty or thirty claimants. Jean's lips softened into mirth. A ludicrous and delicious country, with José Enrique as its apotheosis. She thought of the man as she'd seen him dragged beside the roan mare. His actions might be extravagant, but they were damned effective.

Sally was in the stables, superintending the removal of Ben's shoe. She looked up vaguely as Jean's riding-boots clattered on the tiles. A smile seemed just to have left her face. That was the nearest she could get to happiness. "Hello," she said. "We think it's a nail. Poulticing hasn't done any good. Señor Bosco's here, so Jeremy can't go to Buenos Aires. I want to blister him."

Jean divided the information, which seemed to her important from that which concerned the horse. "How long'll he be here?"

"Well, I don't know. I don't want to let him out until the swelling's gone down."

"Sally, will you pay attention! I mean Señor Bosco."

"Oh, him. He doesn't often come here." The girl looked up and her gaze strayed past Jean to the open door. Her face was pale under the tan and the colour seemed to have been drained from her eyes.

"Let's ride," said Jean, for it was obviously hopeless to make Sally concentrate on her own affairs when she was surrounded by horses.

They went across the paddocks where the longer grass had been burned so that the earth glittered, charred and black, under the merciless sun.

"It's blowing up for a Norther," said Sally, loosening the piece of string which held her shirt at the neck.

The Waif showed his appreciation of her light weight by camel-walking with his back humped and his legs rigid. "Very hot—damp, don't you think—worries Jeremy—peons go to pieces," came in staccato sentences from the figure perched upon the apex of the bucking horse.

When the Waif considered he'd shaken the resistance of his rider, he let down his back with the suddenness of a camp-chair folding. Where there had been a peak there was now a hollow. The ordinary person would've been in the air and from under him his mount would've shot. The Waif pursued the tactics he'd inherited with his blood. Concave, he leaped forward, leaving, so he not unnaturally supposed, a startled rider to fall into the space where, a fraction of a second ago, there had been a horse. But Sally was untroubled by such manœuvres. When the Waif straightened himself, prepared to look round and commiserate with the fallen, he found the girl still on his back. This was too much for his sense of fitness. He repeated the whole proceeding more violently and Sally said: "He doesn't like the saddle. Jeremy rides him bare-backed. They are such friends. He eats a lot. D'you think it matters? The cook is bad, I mean. He's used to a lot in Buenos Aires. There, that's over. He's staying with us, you know."

The Waif gave it up. So did Jean. "Will you please begin all over again. And are you talking about Señor Bosco or that oblong with a leg at each corner which now has some resemblance to a horse?"

Sally said: "Why did he come over?"

Jean explained. There was a gentle silence.

"D'you think it'll do any good?" asked the Waif's rider, with the reins looped from the tips of her fingers and her anxious eyes on the withers which seemed to her rather thin. "He's not in good condition. I'm afraid it's kidneys."

Jean said, "It gives us time," and frowned. Time for what, she wondered? "Sally!" she said suddenly. "What do you know about the Extraordinary House?" She gave the other no chance to answer, but continued quickly, "When we first came I hated talking about Elena. It was her private story and it'd nothing to do with us. Now I feel it's everything. If we knew what had really happened ten years ago we could cope with what's going on to-day, because it's the same, don't you see?"

"No. I don't," said Sally, thinking for the thousandth time that people were much more difficult than horses.

Jean explained. Sally looked at her and went slowly green. "D'you mind if I get off for a moment? I feel awfully sick."

"No, of course," said Jean, perturbed. "I'll hold your horse."

"He'll stand," said the other and threw the reins on to the ground.

There was an interval during which Jean did some hard thinking. When her companion returned and climbed into the saddle, showing lassitude rather than

her usual grace, Jean ventured, "I say, you do look rather awful. D'you think you're all right?"

"Yes, of course," returned Sally, surprised. "I'm just sick. I often am."

The other girl hesitated, but incited by the memory of the Waif's camel-walking and by the weariness of the figure drooping beside her, she said: "You're not going to have a baby by any chance, are you?"

Sally looked at her, startled. "No, how could I? Of course not. Why, did you think . . ."

Jean became explicit. A number of her newly-married contemporaries had recently gratified their in-laws by giving birth to sons, or disappointed them by going through the same amount of trouble for daughters, so she was thoroughly conversant with her subject. "Being sick and all that. . . ." she concluded rather lamely, because Sally continued to look so surprised. "Well, you must know, mustn't you?" she said at last with some acerbity.

"How could I know?" asked the other, wide-eyed.

"Don't you know anything at all?" asked Jean, equally amazed.

It appeared that Sally didn't. She had the vaguest possible ideas about babies and no conception that anything so unusual could happen to her.

"You oughtn't to ride," said Jean. "It's madness."

Sally just stared at her. "I must ride. What else could I do?" Her mind wandered in pursuit of the figures in the next paddock. "Jeremy's taking Señor Bosco to look at the colts. Would you like to see them? They're a bit light. He can tell you all about the Laretez. Yes, that's it, I remember. He drove her to the doctor or something. Perhaps it wasn't the doctor. He'll tell you."

They turned their horses and the Waif broke into the gentlest possible amble. "He looks as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth," said Jean.

Sally vouchsafed, "He won't eat sugar."

A few minutes later, Jeremy, with eyes that couldn't hide the thing which had happened to him and his lean, eager face subtly altered, so that it seemed to be at once more definite and more alive, was taking off his hat and introducing his companion.

For some time they talked about colts while Sally, dragging her words one after another so that her voice had the effect of a broom sweeping up scattered leaves, kept her eyes fixed on Jeremy.

Pedro Bosco was a dark man of middle height and middle age. He seldom smiled, but when he did so he showed remarkably white teeth. The line of his chin was lost in hard, brown skin. His eyes were tired but keen. When he found himself momentarily alone with Jean he asked her how she liked the Extraordinary House, but it was not until lunch was over and the two of them were sitting on the porch while the Ingworths —satisfactorily distant—argued at length with a man who wanted to buy or sell an incubator, that the girl was able to introduce the subject of Elena. "You knew her, didn't you?" she asked, when she thought the ground suitably prepared.

"Yes," replied the man, fixing his attention upon his coffee-cup and prepared to be cautious. Then he made the mistake of looking at Jean and he couldn't make up his mind about the colour of her eyes, so he had to go on looking.

"Do tell me what happened?" The girl leaned forward deliberately using her looks for what they were worth, and the Uruguayan thought of her as a pretty

child, with the natural curiosity of her youth. He said : " I'm afraid my story is a very dull one, not at all what you've heard. It is true I was here at my estancia when Fernando went away—disappeared, if you like——" He made his first concession to the eagerness in the eyes intent on his. " Elena sent me a message, early in the morning, and I went to her at once . . ."

" Was the Duke there ? "

" No, why should he be ? " The Uruguayan recaptured the prudence which had been slipping from him.

" Well, the usual story is that he left the Casino late at night, for some reason which is apparently unknown, and went to the Extraordinary House where he there and then murdered Fernando."

Pedro Bosco smiled. " And that is the sort of tale you like, is it ? Supposing I tell you the one thing I do know . . . the Duke left the Casino because he was suddenly taken ill. He went straight to his hotel and summoned a doctor who was the family practitioner of the Laretez family. It was a question of an operation and the very next day the Spaniard went off to Buenos Aires. It was not till some weeks later that the news drifted out that he was living at the Extraordinary House. Then, of course, tongues began to chatter and the story of murder grew piece by piece . . ."

" D'you mean to say the Duke was not with Elena at all that night ! " exclaimed Jean, immeasurably disturbed by this assault on the fantasy which she'd not only treated as fact, but selected as the reason for actions which were most certainly and unfortunately real.

The Uruguayan shook his head. " So far as I know

he was never even within sight of the house. For it happened as I reached the door that morning, having ridden fast, you will understand, Doctor Malinetti came out. We had some words naturally. Doña Elena was very disturbed about her husband, who'd left her without reason the previous evening. She'd had need of a sedative. Old Malinetti, who'd brought her into the world and, having no daughters of his own, was so devoted to her that it was a joke in the town, had given her something. But he was anxious about the Duke. He told me, then, I remember, with some detail, what was the matter with the man, but it was so long ago—I have forgotten."

Jean was no longer trying to attract confidences. With a frown between her irresponsible brows she seemed an earnest child, confronted with a problem too big for her. "It was only the doctor's word then and he adored Elena," she reflected aloud, and then, with an unexpected smile that appealed irresistibly to her companion, she asked, "D'you believe it yourself?"

"Does it matter now whether I believe it or not? Is it not better that it should be true?"

Jean reflected. They were loyal, these Uruguayans. "Can't you tell me anything else? There is a reason, a very particular reason . . ."

The anxiety in her voice made her suddenly forlorn and Pedro Bosco hastened into speech. "Nothing, I'm afraid, that will be of any interest to you. Elena asked me to take her to see the Minister of Justice who was a relation of hers and also her godfather. We left the house at once, and I remember an old Indian woman barred the door behind us and all the shutters were closed. We drove in silence to the town. Elena was an image, but you cannot conceive her beauty.

It was inimitable and she hated it. Yes, hated it, I tell you ! Yet that morning there was a flame in her which nobody could resist." The man's voice warmed. He forgot his discretion. " If ever I've seen a woman in love, one drove with me that day. I tell you she had only one thought ; she was burning with love and consumed by it . . ."

" Love for whom ? "

A shutter fell. The Uruguayan's expression lost its meaning. " For her husband, naturally. Did I not tell you, she went direct to the Minister of Justice who was like her father, and who better could help her to find Fernando ? "

" Or not to find him ? " suggested Jean with considerable courage.

" That is a romance," said Pedro Bosco, but his voice was troubled. And he was further disconcerted when Jean, springing to her feet, said : " I've got to know somehow ! "

The Uruguayan felt the urge of her young determination, and an idea came to him for he was a lazy man who disliked effort, mental or physical. " The Minister of Justice, who was Elena's godfather, has been dead since a year. There is now only one person perhaps who knows the whole story and that is Doña Maria Gonzalez."

He paused to make an effect and was rewarded by the girl's surprise. " Why should she . . ." began Jean.

Pedro Bosco interrupted. " When the Duke returned and installed himself at the Extraordinary House there was naturally much talk. Such a state of affairs is unheard of in our country." The Uruguayan indicated less certainty concerning the morals of other supposedly

civilized countries. "Naturally the members of both families protested, but Elena would receive no one. She became a recluse. Neither she nor the Duke left the house. There was nothing to be done, but that does not mean that nothing *was* done! For months one person after another—Laretez, Gonzalez, Moreno, all the family—tried to force their way into Elena's presence. The Duke was challenged and did not reply." The Uruguayan was relaxing. His speech flowed into periods. "The situation was intolerable! Imagine it—a young woman of the best family secluded with a man whom the loose tongues of the town accused of murdering her husband. Doña Maria went to see her. How she contrived to pass the gate, which was always kept locked, I do not know, but she did so. Moreover, she remained with Elena for some time, and when she left it was the end of the scandal. There was no more talk in the family, except about the inheritance."

Pedro Bosco, who had known the beauty and the tragedy of Elena, could not deny himself the satisfaction of a phrase. "When Doña Maria shut the gate behind her that day, a tomb was closed. Since then, Elena Laretez has been dead."

CHAPTER XVII

JEAN'S thoughts were busy as she rode back to the Extraordinary House on a mare borrowed from Sally, with a peon ambling behind her. In her mind the old story was inextricably confused with the new version that was being serialized day by day. Staring across the camp while the man opened a fence, Jean wondered if there was anything more she could do, wondered also what Doña Maria would say if she asked for the truth. Some day she might have the right to do so. Her thoughts swung to José Enrique, with whom, she decided, she was half in love. As this was a state of mind she'd always despised, she frowned at the ears of the mare, which were laid back, and was simultaneously conscious of a rider approaching at a fast canter. She'd only time to register her instinctive aversion to the 'tetanus beauty' as she and Tony had nicknamed the newsmonger, when Meggie Tetiopoulos hailed her. "Have you come from the estancia? How's Sally taking it?"

"All right," said Jean deliberately. "She's sorry, of course, because he's valuable and she's had him some time."

"Two years! Well, I suppose that's a long time these days. Then it *is* true?" The fair woman was flushed. Moisture trickled in the creases round her nose and chin. Her wide smile was delighted.

"Quite true, I'm afraid," said Jean, with an acid

determination to punish by ridicule, since no other weapon was available.

"I should've expected Sally to be half off her head?" said Meggie, relishing to the full the disaster which she would look upon as a personal possession until she'd described it in detail throughout Montevideo and Buenos Aires. "I don't know what she'll do without him."

"Oh, come now," said Jean. "It's not as bad as that. She has a second string."

"What?" interrupted the woman, glowing and damp, her splendid hair disordered under the felt which was pushed on to the back of her head. "You don't mean to say she's playing double too. . . ."

Jean thought, you've absolutely no excuse for being such a rotter because you're good-looking and you've had a good time yourself and you're not so awfully old. But she allowed a puzzled expression to spread over her face. "I'm afraid I don't understand. I'm feeling particularly stupid, because I've just been trying to talk Spanish to Señor Bosco."

"Is he at the estancia?" gasped Meggie.

Jean nodded.

"Oo! you do take it calmly!" exclaimed the other, overwhelmed by her own good fortune. With a story like this, she could count on free meals for weeks. If there was one thing Mrs. Tetiopoulos disliked more than an unassailable reputation, it was paying for her food. "Even in Brioni," she began rather wildly, while she remembered her one holiday on the edge of fashion, during which she'd been able to let her imagination run riot among names as unfamiliar to her as they were well known to the world after which she hankered.

"What's Brioni got to do with it?" asked Jean, preparing to go through the opening which the peon had now made, but Meggie screamed at her in her excitement, "Oh, don't go! Don't go! You must tell me—when did they leave? I suppose they'll never come back?"

"What *do* you mean?" asked Jean, achieving an excellent imitation of bewilderment.

"Jeremy, of course, and Mrs. Strang. I saw them at the Parque the other day. They were talking of Buenos Aires and I knew they'd go off the rails some day, but it never occurred to me that Sally . . ."

"Are you quite mad?" exclaimed Jean.

"But they have gone, haven't they? I asked you how Sally was taking it and you said, you said . . ."

For a moment Jean allowed her face to remain blank. Then, as if enlightenment had suddenly been accorded her, she replied: "I thought you were talking about Sally's bay thoroughbred who's gone lame and I said she was taking it all right although she was very cut up about it."

Meggie's face was a study. It had shrunk like a pricked balloon. The colour in her cheeks was fixed, but folds of flesh sagged round it. She *is* old, thought Jean, and was not altogether displeased.

"But Jeremy and Mrs. Strang?" pleaded the woman, who saw herself deprived of popularity and free food.

"What about them?" asked an ingenuous girl, whose eyebrows were a question-mark. "The Strangs are bathing, I expect. They're generally on the beach at this hour. Jeremy and Señor Bosco are intent on the colts at the estancia. They're weedy, I believe." She contrived to imbue the last sentence with an amount

of importance it didn't deserve and she was still talking about 'bone' when a deflated Meggie followed her through the fence.

Side by side they cantered across the rough grass, Jean wondering whether the price of Mrs. Tetiopoulos's company was not too much to pay for the fun she'd had. Then it occurred to her that the woman must have been really beautiful just about the time when nobody looked at anyone but Elena, so she began to talk about the Extraordinary House.

Meggie leaped at the subject with the avidity of a starving mongrel who's seen one good meal disappear. Soon the various reputations of the Laretez family were in shreds. At a suitable moment, Jean inserted the question to which there seemed to be no logical answer. "You've just said Elena was mad about Fernando and insisted on her family allowing the marriage. . . ."

Meggie blinked her wide blue eyes. Robbed of its venom, she supposed this was about what she had said, but the girl must be exceptionally stupid if she couldn't see the implication.

"If it's true," said Jean, "and everyone seems to be agreed that she was obsessed by her husband, how d'you account for her being simultaneously so much in love with the Duke that she helped him to commit murder?"

Meggie didn't even hesitate. "Why, they were just the same type," she said, "big, dark men with altogether too much expression—you know what I mean? Elena hadn't the wits to love a man. All she wanted was a large attractive animal of particular habits."

This time Jean's surprise was not simulated because

she was remembering the record of the Laretez men. "Were they really so much alike?" she asked, for she'd visualized the Duke as the antithesis of the horse-breaking Fernando.

Meggie must've been shaken by the cross-purposes of their earlier conversation, for her reply was an unusual admission of fallibility. "I don't know anything about the Duke's character," she said, "but they were like enough to look at! So are all these men and it doesn't seem to matter whether they're Spanish or South American." She was expressing a favourite grievance, for she didn't like Latins.

CHAPTER XVIII

MRS. WRAXENDON enjoyed being driven by Tony. She was satisfied that there was no speed limit so far as his reactions to the vagaries of Uruguayan motorists were concerned. Relaxing in the bucket-seat beside him and consciously appreciating the finish of the young man's movements, she began to wonder how things were going between him and Jean. Tony must have been affected by her thoughts, for, having shattered the day-dreams of an elderly pedestrian who was standing with bent head in the middle of the road, he removed his finger from the syren and said, "I'm making a mess of things."

"With Jean?"

The man nodded, but his eyes remained on the road. "M'm. I'd got it all planned out. José Enrique wants an assistant on the estancia and I thought I might lay hold of the job. I'm a pretty good 'general,' book-keeping, cattle, a certain amount of horse-sense and experience of the same sort of thing—only more tropical, of course—in Venezuela. But now the fellow's gone and fallen for Jean."

Mrs. Wraxendon considered the situation and it was the thought of her sister-in-law's wrath, which she fancied, however, might be associated with a certain amount of relief, which induced her to encourage further confidences. "I gather you'd included Jean in the programme."

"Of course."

It was delightful to find a young man so certain of what he wanted. Agnes had seen sufficient of the latest generation to be familiar with the involution of its doubts and fears. She allowed her instincts, which were sound, to triumph over her knowledge of the world. "Well, why not?" she said with cheerful calm. "I don't suppose you'd've anything to live *on*, would you, but I dare say that's not so important as *living*, which is what Jean needs."

She thought she'd never met anyone so beset by fear of living as her niece. Tony would present to her undefined misgivings and apprehensions the armour of a sturdy common sense, and with such an example at hand the girl would cease to inflict upon herself unnecessary wounds. If she could only get out of her head that she was the cynosure of hostile interest! Agnes tried to remember if any of her contemporaries had so tortured themselves with the idea that they were at once unfortunate and important. She thought how very little anyone mattered to anybody else. Even the fuss attendant upon a funeral was no more than an exclamation-mark. It put an arresting end to a sentence, but the book went on and on.

Tony's voice saying, "I think she's made up her mind to marry José Enrique," broke into Mrs. Wraxendon's thoughts which had become involved with the pleasure of being herself, independent and indifferent. She hadn't made such a bad job of living, and now that she'd realized it wasn't necessary to move about in order to gain experience, she could do better still.

"What! What did you say?" Agnes roused her-

self from the pleasant confusion of retrospection and anticipation. Tony's face was drawn, but his lips smiled. "He's a damned good fellow, but I can't see him in relation to Jean. That's just it. There wouldn't be any balanced relationship. She'd be submerged altogether."

Mrs. Wraxendon was averse to the idea of her niece being mixed up with anything so violent as José Enrique, whose moods, politics and conversation seemed to her equally exhausting. She preferred the mother, fine as tempered steel. "Why d'you think Jean contemplates any such thing?" she asked with a touch of severity, but it was noticeable that she didn't immediately discredit the suggestion. After all, if there wasn't much unquestionable sense in evidence to-day, there was just as little which could at once be stigmatized as indisputably preposterous.

Tony explained. Agnes listened. Leaning towards each other, with the confidence engendered by their recognition of mutual qualities, they discussed the matter from several angles. The man said: "I feel completely raw beside José. He's got the technique at his fingers' ends and I'm a novice. I don't mean by that he isn't dead-set on Jean, but he knows how to please women. It's part of his training and I've never looked at 'em. Come to think of it, we're brought up wrong. We're taught all sorts of useless things and never how to get us wives!" Tony grinned. "You'll acknowledge that's really a much more important catch than the sort you get fielding at cover-point."

Agnes laughed. She said: "I don't think Jean will take José unless something happens to push her into it. I mean she won't do it if she has time to

reflect, but the impulse of a dramatic moment might be too much for her."

"I wish this blasted wind would drop," said Tony with anxiety concerning his collar. "It's going round to the North and that'll mean all sorts of trouble."

By this time they'd arrived at the National and European Bank, with whose manager Agnes was already on excellent terms, due, not only to her manners, which the old man considered distinguished, but to the size of her letter of credit.

Mr. Greene-Dixon was English, but did his best to forget the fact. He'd been ten years in Brazil, where he'd acquired the habit of coffee-drinking, and nearly double that number in Uruguay, with which ardent republic he'd so completely identified himself that he was liable to be consulted on constitutional formulæ as well as official finance.

The imminence of a Norther always caused in him a disinclination for any avoidable effort, so when Mrs. Wraxendon was announced, he joyfully dismissed his secretary and ordered coffee. "You will make a concession to my habit, won't you?" he said, drawing up an enormous leather chair.

Agnes, sinking into it with the feeling that she was well protected from the world, the wind and the perplexities of her juniors, said, "I came to pay my rent, not to drink your delicious mocha," but she did not further protest, so that very soon there was a cup on a low table in front of her, and Mr. Green-Dixon, white-haired, pink-skinned and dapper in spite of the heat, was offering her a cigarette out of the box he kept for directors and company-managers.

For a moment or two they talked of the country and the necessity of familiarizing Europe with the spectacular beaches of Carrasco. Then Mrs. Wraxendon asked if it would be possible to extend her lease of the Extraordinary House. She thought, when her guests were gone, she would like to live there for a while by herself. In no other place had she found such a satisfactory sense of completion. If she had left Europe with no other purpose than a vague desire to see the world and without any consideration of its constituents, she had, during her few weeks at Carrasco, correlated the world and herself, since she now realized that in her imagination she held all the essentials of the universe.

Mr. Greene-Dixon pursed his lips and dabbed at his long, white moustache with an immaculate handkerchief. "I am in somewhat of a difficult position with regard to Señora Laretez," he said, "for she gave me no effective address in Spain and, so far, she has acknowledged none of my communications."

Agnes contented herself with a look of inquiry.

"There is a considerable amount of business to which she ought to attend with regard to the succession, you understand?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't," replied Agnes with just the right amount of interest.

Mr. Greene-Dixon overcame a momentary hesitation, for, although he liked talking, he was no gossip, but the matter of the Laretez inheritance was common property. "You will've heard all the stories about the owners of the Extraordinary House—there, the name has slipped out, but, of course, by this time it is familiar to you. You know that Fernando Laretez disappeared ten years ago and since nobody knew

whether he was alive or dead, his wife or widow was in an impossible situation. After the necessary period had elapsed, the family went to the courts to obtain leave to presume death, for the division of property is very complicated in this country. Up till then, Doña Elena had been supporting the establishment at Carrasco on her own money, for she was, to some small extent, an heiress. When the case first came into the court, she opposed the appeal of the Laretez family, maintaining that there was no proof whatsoever of her husband's death. Possibly she was afraid of losing control of the estate, to a considerable portion of which she, naturally, had claim, and which moreover she had administered as next of kin, during Don Fernando's absence."

The Bank Manager paused to sip his coffee. "Some sort of pressure may've been brought to bear on her, but I fancy the relatives privately agreed with her concerning an allowance to be paid as soon as leave to presume death was granted. In effect, Doña Elena withdrew her opposition. The family won their case. And now . . ." Mr. Greene-Dixon permitted himself a gesture which was not at all English. "It is, as I say, a question of the succession, and between ourselves there is no end to it!"

Gratified by his visitor's display of interest, the Manager would gladly have supplied further details, but, with an air of putting herself entirely in his hands, Mrs. Wraxendon asked, "Is there no way of getting in touch with my landlady? By the way, did she marry the Spaniard after the courts decided her widowhood?"

"I have no information about that," said the Manager with regret. "She has always signed cheques

by the name of Laretez. As for getting in touch with her, it'll be difficult. In confidence, I may tell you . . ." The man's face acquired a deeper shade of rose. His hands indicated the concession he was making. "I fancy it has been made impossible."

Mrs. Wraxendon sat erect in the chair which was obviously intended for positions of greater ease. "But why?" she asked.

Then, feeling that possibly she'd been indiscreet, she added, "When are they coming back?" She thought, of course they'll be married in Spain without any fuss and return quite openly. If Elena is now only reasonably beautiful, they'll live down the whole foolish story in a year.

But Mr. Greene-Dixon, having gone so far, evidently thought he might as well go farther. "In my opinion," he said, "they're not going to come back at all."

Agnes was more than surprised. In fact, she was so illogically astounded that she could only stare. It seemed to her impossible that Elena should voluntarily leave the house on which she'd so impressed her personality that neither could, surely, be complete without the other.

Mr. Greene-Dixon, delighted with the impression he'd made, irritated by the damp heat which pressed upon his temples, and rendered reckless by the knowledge that the next three days would in any case be unendurable, threw discretion to the winds. "You can be quite certain I've excellent reason for what I say."

If Mrs. Wraxendon had agreed, his painfully acquired habit of reticence might have conquered the verbosity

to which he was naturally inclined, but she at once protested, "Oh, I'm sure you're mistaken! The house is waiting for her. Heaven knows what'll happen if she doesn't come back." In their mutual excitement, neither noticed the form her dissent had taken.

Mr. Greene-Dixon swallowed his last mouthful of coffee, but omitted to wipe his moustache. He leaned forward with his arms spread across the desk, "Ever since Don Fernando disappeared, his wife has been transferring money to Spain. She has lived on nothing —one servant I understand, and that an old Indian, who was her foster-mother."

"But why should she?" exclaimed Agnes, obsessed by the claims of the Extraordinary House on the woman whose secret it had kept. Then she thought, how foolish; naturally Elena would marry her Duke and, freed from the past, live lavishly in Spain, but so much forethought did not accord with her conception of the beauty's character.

Mr. Greene-Dixon explained. "The Duke is a younger son, of a good family certainly, but, so far as I know, without funds. I've never heard of an account in this country. He may quite well possess nothing but his title, and you know how many there are in Spain."

So he's been living on Elena, thought Mrs. Wraxendon, and at his instigation she's been sending Laretez money out of the country. The story became less romantic than it had seemed when Doña Maria described the Duke, dumb and blind to everyone but the woman on the other side of the table, leaning forward, his dark face set and his hand, on which blazed the great, heraldic ring, clenched round a glass

of wine, which was subsequently spilt. Why? Doña Maria had specially mentioned the fact, but had not explained it. Was there any significance attached to the spilt wine? Agnes Wraxendon moved impatiently. She was becoming as fanciful as Jean.

CHAPTER XIX

LATER in the day, Jean, seated at a table covered with a red-and-white checked cloth, under the pines which surrounded Cavallini's thatched, wooden restaurant, was also discussing Elena. She and José Enrique were drinking cocktails preparatory to attending the Congress, at which the leader of the Altruistas was expected to declare, not only the policy upon which the party had decided, but his own personal intentions should the President close the National Assembly as a prelude to the inauguration of a new form of constitution.

At first, José Enrique had talked politics and Jean, studying him gravely, because it seemed to her now that she saw all the elements of excellence in his strong and rather heavy face, wondered, without criticism, whether he or the Party ranked larger in his impassioned mind. Perhaps he could not distinguish between the two, but both, she thought, were definitely subservient to the country. José Enrique worshipped Uruguay, but as a visionary republic, having little or nothing in common with the impoverished land that was already overburdened by an unnecessarily complicated system of legislation.

Suddenly the man said : " See ! I cannot talk any more politics, or my speech will be stale. Let us talk about you and me, who are going to be very important to us, is it not so ? "

It was charmingly said and Jean was inclined to surrender to the imperious dominance of the man. With him, she would never have to make a decision for herself. She'd be able to lose her identity—that identity which had caused her continuous discomfort and a certain amount of acute misery. José Enrique's wife could be a personage, without being the least individual. Jean said : " Don't take my breath away altogether before your meeting ! " and, as a way of escape from the decision which she saw thrust upon her, she began to tell him of her talk with Pedro Bosco. " Oh ! " she exclaimed, suddenly remembering the end of it.

Her eyes were childish and excited. They were also very round, so that José, feeling tender, laughed at her gently and asked, " Well, what is it ? A great thought ? Share it with me." He imbued the last words with a familiarity that wrapped her more warmly than the North wind, which tormented the pines, jellified the waiters and made a sticky dampness of whatever was left uncovered on the tables.

Without actually blushing, Jean acquired added warmth and vitality. She hurried over her explanation, concluding it with, " So you see your mother is the one person who knows the whole story. It was she who put an end to all the fuss about looking for Fernando and bothering Elena." She paused with very bright eyes fixed on the man.

" And you want to know why, eh ? Little curious one ? " At that moment José would have given her anything. His loyalty to his own people, deep-rooted and disturbed only by a tongue to which speech came too easily, was in abeyance, or perhaps he already

included Jean in the family to which he was determined she should soon belong.

He said : " Because you are you and I hope also mine, I will tell you what is truly a secret, but you must not repeat it. Swear that to me."

Jean had a momentary sense of being trapped, for she hadn't yet agreed with herself concerning her feelings for the Uruguayan. And instinct, which she distrusted because she'd so often been hurt by it, insisted that while there was anything left of her, she could never belong to any man as José's wife would do. Well then, there wouldn't be anything left of her. That was all there was to it ! Jean, impatient with herself and excited by the man who had always been a challenge to her surface sophistication, under which she was defenceless, nodded, " Yes. I promise. Tell me."

" It is just this. . . ." said José quietly. " After the fire at the estancia I told you something of the Laretez family and perhaps I should not've told you so much, but I am careless unless I stop to think. Well, Fernando was the strangest of them all. Nobody wished that he should marry, but as soon as he and Elena had seen each other, it was inevitable. Her family did everything to stop it. They threatened the girl with a convent and she retorted by running away." José paused. His face was grave and his voice lowered. " To the Laretez, it must've been obvious that Fernando's sanity depended on the marriage, so, at last, the matter was arranged and it was no doubt a folly, but so is such a love that brooks neither sense nor reason."

The Uruguayan's eyes belied his words, for to him love was a form of genius. " For a little while after

the marriage things were well, or at least there was no talk. Then I went to Paris, but even there I received most of the news. Fernando's temper was getting the better of him. There were incidents. I cannot tell you of them, but at last a peon was killed and if it hadn't been for Elena's godfather who, as you know, was Minister of Justice, there would've been serious trouble. As it was, the families united to insist on some form of restraint. Elena refused to consider it. She stood up to them all and told them that she'd be nurse and warder and guardian combined. Because it was necessary to have a doctor at hand, she made Fernando build the Extraordinary House. The windows are too high for spying. The garden is secret behind those high hedges. There is only one gate and that can be locked."

Silence hung over the table. It was impaired by a gusty and irascible wind. Jean moved a glass. Her fingers were steady, but they left damp marks where they pressed. "I see," she said. "He was mad."

"Not always," returned José Enrique in the same measured voice. "He had, I believe, long periods during which they went about in society so that nobody guessed the truth. Elena was always beside him, watching. When he broke out, he was a beast, whom only she could control. So no servants were allowed to sleep in the house, except the half-Indian woman who was Elena's foster-mother. Imagine, what a terrible life for a girl who was also quite inconceivably beautiful."

"But she didn't mind it," said Jean with conviction, and wondered why she was so sure.

"She must've minded that last night. . . ." said José Enrique dreamily. By invoking the past, the

girl was releasing in him the child who had believed in hobgoblins, the boy who had lain awake at nights thinking of romance, the youth to whom women had been adventure.

The Uruguayan scarcely heard her sharp, "What about that night? Tell me." Jean had to repeat the question before the man returned to the present, with a soft lazy shrug, and said: "I don't know what happened. I've no idea. It may be that Fernando drove away in one of his mad rages and did some damage to himself, or others. . . ."

José imagined innumerable equivocal circumstances in which the most violent of all the Laretez could have become involved, but to satisfy the girl he continued, "It may be there is some truth in the story of the Duke, but, if Fernando was killed, it must surely have been in self-defence. What happened that night is a mystery, but it is an old one. . . ." His eyes, which searched Jean's, suggested that there were other mysteries worth solving. "The one certain thing is that none of the family really wanted Fernando alive again, although, without doubt, they were concerned with how he died."

There was another silence, but the wind took hold of it and stripped it of meaning. Jean felt as if a blanket soaked in hot water were being pressed over them. She said: "Then Doña Maria was satisfied to know the truth. . . ." It seemed inadequate.

Again José Enrique's shoulders rippled. "It may be that she was relieved." He thought to himself that a madman had died without any definite scandal. Time was according him the halo of martyrdom. What more could any family ask?

Jean shattered his complacence by banging both

hands on the table. "The whole thing's gibberish!" she cried. "I can't make head or tail of it."

José stared at her, divided between amusement and surprise.

"Don't you see . . ." insisted the girl; "you make Elena a Madonna one moment and a harlot the next."

A smile spread over the Uruguayan's face. On his lips it was mocking. By the time it reached his eyes, it had acquired a dangerous intimacy. Jean thrilled to it, and for the first time looked boldly into the future. "So are all desirable women," said José Enrique gently. "You have exactly described them."

While they drove into the town at a pace which left other motorists congratulating themselves on their varied but always surprising escapes, Jean puzzled over the attitude of the Laretez family. They'd allowed their daughter-in-law's virtue to be impinged rather than acknowledge the taint of madness in their blood. That was perhaps natural, but what about Elena's own people? And if a member of the clan had such power that he could muzzle justice in a land priding itself on the incorruptibility of its courts, why couldn't he have invented a suitably innocuous death for Fernando, so that the widow could marry her Spaniard without any scandal at all?

By the time Jean acknowledged that the whole story was beyond her comprehension, they'd arrived in Montevideo and were sliding over the tram-lines between agitated hand-carts and taxis whose brakes shrieked as they skidded out of the way. There was an air of somnolence in the streets. Shirt-sleeved figures lounged in the doorways. Others, their pyjamas open over hirsute chests, moved slowly and with many pauses along the hot pavements. The ice-

cream men wilted with empty buckets. Even the children, in white overalls, played with less vociferous energy than usual. The North wind was already exasperating people whose nerves would soon be beyond control.

In the avenue leading to the main square, a crowd had gathered to watch and acclaim the arrival of the Altruista leaders. There was a cheer as a popular Minister passed into the Teatro Imperial and when José's well-known grey car shot over the rise and streaked like a racer between the acacias, the throng surged forward in imminent danger of destruction.

Jean was divided between excitement and anxiety, but the Uruguayan was evidently accustomed to such scenes. His brakes went on with a crash. The wheel spun under his capable hands. In a moment they were at a standstill half-across the avenue and the rest of the traffic was blocked by a dense mass of men, mostly young, who pressed round the car, their hats in the air, their dark faces smiling so that they seemed to be gashed with the brilliant white of their teeth.

A roar of applause brought José on to the step and there he stood, bare-headed, laughing, an idol of the mob, but as Jean soon realized, with a dignity that neither position nor surroundings could impair. It's his sincerity, she thought, as she listened to the mighty phrases which tumbled over the heads of the crowd. He really believes all that. He wants to give them impossible wages and invisible hours and pensions as soon as they're born and insurance after they die. With innumerable eyes on her, she was struggling to maintain a gravity suited to the occasion, but, when she thought of the muddle José would get into if the Providence in which he didn't believe failed to supply

the manna on which his Utopian schemes depended, her lips relaxed.

It was impossible to resist the enthusiasm of the crowd. There was not a woman in it, yet waves of excitement verging on hysteria broke against the improvised rostrum from which the eloquence of José Enrique poured in splendid periods, punctuated and emphasized by gestures unconsciously imitated by his followers. Jean, moved by the general ardour as well as by her relationship with the orator, found her eyes stinging and her throat hard. She was relieved when she was dragged out of the car and, closely pressed against José Enrique, borne forward in the direction of the theatre.

There were moments of intense confusion when it seemed to her that nobody could move in any direction, that the doors guarded by police were an unattainable goal, that José couldn't shake several thousand hands at the same time and that the inchoate pressure of the mob was the embodiment of the Norther which was depriving them all of their senses.

Then she was in a crowded hall, surrounded by still more hands. She was climbing a staircase among an inordinate number of feet. And, at last, she was in a box with Doña Maria and the absence of movement was so startling that she had a sudden impression of it as a coffin.

José's mother was sitting well back in the shadow of a curtain. She was superbly poised and cool in spite of the stifling heat. A faint clean scent was exhaled when she moved. The folds of her black silk suggested whalebone. Between her pearls and the shining orderliness of her hair, her face was crumpled brown paper. Jean had never seen it so entirely

devoid of expression. Accepting the old woman's gesture of welcome, more familiar than the usual hand-clasp, the girl thought, she doesn't approve, but he's her son. She'd never criticize him. For the first time in her life, conscious of the irremediable gap between generations, Jean thought of it not as a blunder or even a crime on the part of her elders, but as an obstacle which she regretted. Instinctively, she was attracted to Doña Maria, in whom she sensed all the qualities she would've liked to have possessed, but she realized that, even as José Enrique's wife, she would not be able to penetrate the old woman's defences.

With a sigh compounded of unformulated regret and a suffocating excitement, the girl leaned over the edge of the box. Below her was a carpet of dark heads, all of them male. The galleries looked as if they were upholstered with uniform suiting, seamed by row after row of faces, olive-skinned and damp with sweat. The theatre was so closely packed that no space was visible between the seats. Men stood six-deep against the walls. They clustered like locusts on the ledge of the balcony and overflowed on to the platform which ushers were unsuccessfully attempting to clear.

When José appeared before the footlights, the whole audience rose to its feet. It seemed to Jean that the building trembled as wave after wave of cheering echoed against the roof. Naturally, she caught the enthusiasm and while she clapped till her gloves split, she was in complete unison with the man she intended to marry.

José Enrique made a gesture for silence. With dramatic abruptness every light in the house was extinguished. For a fraction of a second the audience

waited in darkness. The stillness was so exaggerated that it became an emphatic negation of sound. Then a spotlight picked out the solitary figure of José Enrique. In a tube of greenish light, he stood, surrounded by darkness sentient and alive.

For a moment Jean was acutely nervous. Then she lost all consciousness of herself, for José's voice was an organ. With it, he could rouse every emotion of which his highly strung Latin audience was capable. The leader of the Altruistas represented to the thousands, so closely pressed that they were incapable of individual reactions, not only all that they hoped to gain without working, but a magnificent gamble with reality.

At first the man, whose stature seemed to be increased by the pillar of light which set him apart, spoke slowly and without movement. Then as he felt the response of the mighty audience, he flung out his arms. His voice warmed and quickened.

The invisible listeners stirred so that each felt his neighbour's breathing. And José's speech ceased to be oratory. His stupendous periods, his sudden, apposite pauses, became the measure of a man's pulse, the hammering of his heart and the raging of his blood, and that man was the composite entity of five thousand.

The speaker was livid in the spotlight. Wrought by his own emotion, for José Enrique had long ago lost all sense of himself as an individual, he was haggard and streaked with sweat. One of his histrionic gestures had swept his hair into disorder. It fell now about his brow and stood out as a rough frame for his impassioned face. He was fighting, not for himself, but for a nation he believed on the eve of dis-

solution, for, to him, the President's conscientious objective preluded a destructive Trinity of Capitalism, Feudalism and Foreign Capital.

Jean, breathless and immobile in the box, which hung over the darkness, caught a few phrases, such as 'man's inalienable right to die for freedom,' but it had ceased to matter what José said. His audience were with him. On one of the front seats a boy was sobbing. A thunder of feet accompanied the peroration.

José Enrique crashed his fist on an imaginary table. His body straightened, his shoulders went back. He towered above the hypothetic enemy crumpled at his feet. And the illusion held. A last terrific challenge blazed across the hall and the speaker's silence did the rest.

Jean was on her feet with five thousand men. Her eyes were streaming and she cared no more than the youths who fought their way over massed bodies, shouting themselves hoarse. The uproar increased, but José remained immobile.

The lights went up. A tidal wave of bodies overwhelmed the platform. How she found her way to the car and what happened to Doña Maria, Jean never knew. But a long time afterwards, it seemed to her, while they drove more slowly than usual through a deserted street, José Enrique kissed her, very gently, on the lips.

CHAPTER XX

NEXT day the Norther was in full swing. The River Plate was an angry yellow. Tea-coloured waves flung themselves upon deserted beaches. A fog of sand drove along the front. The eucalyptus shrieked in frenzy. Under them the earth was littered with bark and leaves. With damp clutching fingers, the wind from the swamps and the fœtid tropical forests laid hold of Carrasco and wrung from it sweat and curses.

Mrs. Wraxendon, extended on the brown sofa in the sitting-room, fanned herself gently and wondered if there was enough ice. She hoped nobody would ask her opinion on anything except the weather.

Jean, splayed over a wide chair, felt that her intentions were dripping through her toes and fingers. George, who'd already changed his collar three times, insisted on superintending the lethargy of the men who were considering, at some future date, the excavation of the well. His voice blew in through the window with the rustle of dry leaves and the banging of a shutter. Jean said, "If he asks them to hurry, he'll be knifed," and she wondered, without much interest, how that would affect the situation.

Ten miles away, at the Parque Hotel, Jeremy and Kay were drinking tepid cocktails and talking about themselves. They were less affected by the heat than the others, because such fires blazed in them that even

a Norther could do little to increase their physical discomfort, which was only equalled by their illogical mental ecstasy. "It's absolutely bloody about Pedro Bosco, but he can't stay for ever," announced Jeremy, as if it were an original thought, although he'd repeated the identical words at least a dozen times.

Kay, smoking without noticing it, agreed, while she appreciated as if she'd never seen it before the brown and—she confessed—rather nutcracker keenness of her companion's profile. "I can't think why the fellow wanted to come over at all," said Jeremy, frowning.

"Well, it is his estancia. . . ." murmured Kay, because it didn't really matter what she said.

"I shouldn't think he could stick here for more'n a week," continued the man, whose ideas were limited.

"Very likely not."

"Well then, we can buzz off as soon as he's gone, can't we?" Jeremy leaned upon the table and stared at Kay as if it was essential that he should memorize every feature.

"I suppose so. Yes." Kay felt her lips parting. She'd no longer any control over her own body. "Where can we go?" she asked, feeling she ought to be practical.

"Anywhere you like. Your husband'll divorce you I suppose?"

"What!" Kay was startled. She hadn't visualized anything so drastic.

But Jeremy was rushing on. "It's easy enough for Sally and me. We've only got to rig up a case of incompatibility and we can get free by mutual consent. Out here, the law's damn decent."

Kay was further surprised. "Don't you have to sin

in order to get the benefit of a second chance?" she asked.

"Good Lord, no! We've got far beyond that muck. The Uruguayan law treats husbands and wives as reasonable human beings. It considers that if they can't get on together, they're better apart."

"We haven't achieved such an apotheosis of common sense in England," said Kay, and she wondered if George would divorce her and if she wanted him to do so.

Then Jeremy put his hand on hers as it lay on the table and the shock of it tingled up her arm. Her heart shook, or was it that something hot and sweet poured into it? Kay was interested in her reactions. She'd never imagined she could be so affected by a man's touch.

"You'll come, won't you?" said Jeremy. "There's a place in Argentina not so far from Buenos Aires, where we can ride and swim. We'll go there, as soon as Bosco clears out."

"Have you told Sally?" asked Kay. It was getting very serious. She disliked talk, but, obviously, there was a great deal of talking to be done. What on earth would George do if there was a divorce? Kay imagined him, a dry, lonely, taciturn little man, yes, definitely little, and middle-aged as well. It wasn't fair. Kay dismissed the thought, for she'd always been scrupulously fair.

"Sally knows all about us, although I haven't told her anything," said Jeremy.

"How can she know then?"

The man hesitated. He was neither clever nor intuitive, but he had a momentary conception of the elusive and yet intensely intimate relationship that he

had unwittingly shared with his wife. While he hesitated for an answer, the Humber-Snipe, piled with parcels suggesting food, drew up in front of the open window by which they sat and Tony gestured to them with such urgency that they were on their feet and half-way out of the hall before they realized what they were doing.

"Get in!" said Tony abruptly, and he opened the door beside him while he explained to Kay, "I've been looking for you because of Jean. There's the devil of a mess in the town. The President's closed the National Assembly. He's dead-right, of course, but it's an arbitrary measure."

Kay, hypnotized by the young man's determination, already had her foot on the step, but she paused to ask, "What on earth's it got to do with Jean?"

"Hurry up!" ordered Tony, ignoring the presence of Jeremy. "That speech last night was supposed to be seditious. The police have been told to arrest a lot of Altruistas, most of whom have taken refuge in the Argentine or Spanish Legations, but José Enrique won't budge an inch."

By this time, Kay was in the car, and without invitation Jeremy had flung himself on to the back seat. The Snipe turned like a polo-pony, and as Tony put his foot down, they leaped at once to full speed and went tearing down the boulevard which was fortunately empty of traffic.

"But what's he going to do?" asked Kay, and then, "What do you want me to do?"

Tony answered the first question, "I don't know. I don't believe he knows himself. It depends on how much support he gets." Skilfully evading a couple who appeared intent on suicide, the Snipe swung

round a corner. "As soon as I heard the news," continued Tony, "I rushed round to his house which was in a state of siege. There were a lot of police about and José was standing on the steps with a revolver in each hand."

Jeremy, holding on to the back of Kay's seat, said: "But he can't resist arrest for ever!"

"He says he's every right to do so. It's an unconstitutional order, and if enough of his party rally round him, the police won't have a chance of carrying it out."

"It's a mad show!" said Kay, rather breathless. "And what'll happen if the Altruistas just fade away and leave their leader to make good his own boasts?"

Tony's face hardened. "That's what I don't know. But of one thing I'm sure—José Enrique won't give way."

"He'll have to," protested Kay, hot, damp and irritated. The wind blustered through the open window and tore at her hair. Her skirt was creased between her knees. Acutely conscious of Jeremy's presence, she was aware also of misgivings which as yet had no form. Things were going to happen, she thought indignantly, and too many things had already happened.

Tony turned to her with a strange light in his eyes. His mouth hardened. "That's all you know about it," he said with contempt in his voice. Kay was divided between anger and amusement. It was the Norther, of course. In another minute they'd be quarrelling.

With an effort she spoke quietly. "What about Jean?"

Tony's face showed nothing of his feelings. "I have an idea they got engaged last night." Then his fore-

head creased and he became younger and more attractive. "I'm not certain, but in any case she's got to know before all Carrasco is screaming that José's been shot, or gassed, or worse!"

The Snipe slid into the sandy lane. A moment later, Tony and Kay were in the dim sitting-room where Mrs. Wraxendon's position was a concession to the heat and Jean was making herself unnecessarily sticky by squeezing lemons into a glass.

"What's the matter?" asked the girl as soon as she saw Tony's face, and it was at him she looked, while Kay interrupted his explanations.

"Nothing'll happen," insisted the woman. "It'll be like last time. A lot of drama and no damage."

But as soon as she'd grasped the story, Jean made a dash for the stairs. She was half-way up them when she called, "Turn the car round. I'll just get a hat. I'm coming. . . ."

There was a moment's silence. Then Mrs. Wraxendon, rising with agility, said: "The child can't go into the town if there's going to be a revolution."

Tony, with the memory of José's face as he'd last seen it, had come to the conclusion that only Jean's presence could avert a tragedy, so he said: "You'll find she'll go and I think she ought to if . . ." He couldn't bring himself to refer to the engagement which he erroneously believed existed, but he was going to play fair. José Enrique was up against it. If Jean wanted to be there too, he'd see she'd every chance!

The girl came running down the stairs. "Hurry up, Tony, you must drive like hell!"

Kay made a movement to accompany them. She supposed it was expected of her. But Mrs. Wraxendon

suddenly exerted the authority which nobody ever questioned. "No," she said, "you can stay here. I'm going with Jean."

Amidst a stupefied silence, she went quietly upstairs and in a surprisingly short time returned, suitably clothed for the town.

Jean had hardly time to call, "Oh, be quick, do be quick! You don't know what may be happening," before her aunt had established herself on the back seat and was saying in her usual well-modulated voice, "Not too fast, Tony. We may as well keep ourselves intact."

By the time they reached the Calle Verde, a crowd had gathered at each end. Mounted police prevented them straying into the street, which was empty except for the group round the steps of José Enrique's house. In front of the door, in full view of the patrol which had been sent to arrest him and which still hesitated at a respectful distance, stood the leader of the Altruistas. He had just concluded an impassioned speech, appealing for support at a crisis which might determine the fate of the country. The throng, which pressed behind and between the horses, were still cheering him. Two Ministers of the Altruista group, who had hurried to the assistance of their leader, were standing on the steps with revolvers ready. Armed partisans marched up and down on both pavements. Humour was added to the situation by the presence of a maid-servant who was handing round platefuls of sandwiches. José Enrique, with his two pistols in one hand and a piece of cake in the other, was boldly facing his enemies, while he reasseverated that his action was justified, since he had as much right to resist illegal arrest as a citizen to protect his person against house-breakers.

Above him, the old woman who'd been his nurse and was now his housekeeper, hung over the rail of a balcony and in a shrill treble, screamed to him, " Don José, do not give yourself up. The Blesséd Virgin will protect you ! Don José, do not let yourself be taken alive ! "

It was this scene which met the startled eyes of Mrs. Wraxendon and her niece as they hurried out of the car. At first it was impossible for them to force their way through the crowd which increased every moment, although it seemed strangely apathetic, but, eventually, Agnes Wraxendon's manner began to produce its usual effect. Yard by yard, she was borne, rather than moved, towards the horses blocking the entrance to the street and Jean, as a straw on the current, was swept after her. When it came to a passage of tongues with the police, Mrs. Wraxendon had the advantage, for she addressed them clearly and with extreme dignity in English. Accustomed to companioning royalty through the crowds of a race-course, she didn't so much slip between the chargers, as pass naturally, under drawn swords. A startled officer shouted at her, but she was already in the Calle Verde, accompanied by a crumpled and tremulous Jean who was further disturbed to find she couldn't get her voice out of her throat where it had unaccountably stuck.

As soon as José Enrique saw them, he deserted his post of vantage on the steps. Quietly, without swagger, he met them in mid-street. Bowing to Mrs. Wraxendon, he turned so that, for a moment, Jean felt herself isolated by the tall figure whose dignity was unimpaired by the lack of a collar, for José had been dressing when the police arrived at his door. Looking straight into the girl's eyes, the Uruguayan

asked her in a grave and deeply moved voice, " Jean, will you marry me ? "

When she didn't answer because she was unable to force a single word out of her mouth, he said, equally simply, " Please will you tell me now."

Jean, with her eyes wide and blazing, her breasts heaving under her thin dress, managed to nod her head. Then the words tumbled out, " Yes, yes, of course ! You know. . . ."

The man interrupted " Thank you." He looked up the street, but the police were being reinforced by troops. Behind them, the crowd was wedged in a mass which spread solidly over the neighbouring square. " You'd better go into my house," said José. " You'll be safe there till this folly is over ! " He shrugged his distaste and, after a swift whisper, " Some day I'll tell you how grateful I am," he turned to Mrs. Wraxendon.

Subsequently, so far as Jean was concerned, time ceased to be measurable. The hours dragged themselves one after another, while aunt and niece waited in a shuttered room that smelled of dust and tobacco. They had no means of knowing when morning became afternoon. At intervals, the servant who'd been handing sandwiches in the street brought them food which they did not touch. At intervals, also, Mrs. Wraxendon reiterated a number of sensible reasons why they should immediately return to Carrasco. But Jean always shook her head. She didn't want to talk, but once or twice she said : " I must stay. I can't desert him."

" What good are you doing ? " asked Agnes, without impatience.

" I don't know," returned the girl, " perhaps none, but I must stay."

José's house had a back entrance, strongly guarded by Altruistas, and, through this, Tony succeeded in bringing news. It was not reassuring. The first time he came in, very hot, with dust caked on his face, he said abruptly : " It's no good. The President's got the whole town. He's installed himself and his staff in the main fire-station which is impregnable. The affair's been thoroughly well planned. For months he's been moving troops and changing officers. The army here is loyal to a man and he's got the police and the fire brigade. The whole place is patrolled, and, with the exception of José Enrique and his friends here, he's collared every Altruista who counts."

Jean looked blank. Her lips were stiff, but she contrived to formulate a question.

" What ought he to do ! " repeated Tony, " clear out, of course ! But he won't."

Sunshine crept through the slats of the shutters. Bars of brilliant gold, furred with dust, lay across the carpet. The wind was a husky murmur and the heat pressed upon them so that the clothes clung to their bodies and sweat ran down their faces.

Mrs. Wraxendon scarcely moved from the chair on which she'd established herself. Further effort seemed to her superfluous. She knew that she couldn't force Jean to leave the house, so, as a matter of course, she adapted herself to the situation. It was, she thought, comedy rather than tragedy, but, at any moment, the quality of the acting might change.

After they'd been there a long time, there was a sudden increase of activity in the street. The feet patrolling the pavements hurried back and forth. Voices rose, and amidst a confusion of movement some

sort of decision seemed to be reached. Running footsteps echoed on the cobbles.

"I must see what's happening," said Jean. She was on her feet, very white, with a curious rigidity about her limbs. But at that moment, Tony, who'd made another reconnaisance in the town, came into the room. There was relief in his face. "It may be all right," he said. "The President's sent a messenger to tell José nobody'll interfere with him if he likes to join his friends at the Argentine Legation."

"Oh!" said Jean. "Will he go?"

"If he's any sense, he will. He's doing no good here. There's what amounts to martial law in the town. No speeches of any sort are allowed. As soon as a few people gather, the police move 'em on. They won't even allow meetings in the political clubs. The Altruistas haven't a chance. This place is completely surrounded and it's impossible to rush it, or to make an effective demonstration. The President's been damned clever."

Mrs. Wraxendon looked at her niece. So the play would end with cat-calls and hisses. She wished Jean were not so vulnerable.

From the sounds which drifted through the shutters, it seemed that the conference on the steps had ended. The footsteps resumed their march. Up and down the pavement they went, dragging and a little uneven.

Tony hurried out of the room and returned with an expression of dismay. "He's refused. It's mad, of course, but rather splendid."

Mrs. Wraxendon thought it was wholly foolish.

They continued to sit in the dusty room, while the bars of sunlight shifted and finally disappeared. Time passed with the effect of a weight dragged slowly out

of their reach. At last, when the heat had settled with a density only equalled by the mass of flies clustering on the walls and furniture, Jean said, " I can't bear it. I must see him," and she went impetuously into the hall.

The old housekeeper was standing there, listening. When she saw the girl, she put clawlike fingers on her arm and drew her upstairs. The others followed and a moment later they were on the balcony, with the street a canyon between the tall houses over whose roofs the sunset slanted.

The crowd had thinned. It no longer stretched across the square. The mounted police had advanced and behind them the watching faces were those of loiterers, casually interested in a play too long protracted. The group on the steps had dwindled, but its components were still armed. On the edge of the pavement sat José Enrique with his head bent.

Damn it all, why can't he give in, thought Tony. His people haven't a chance of getting to him.

Mrs. Wraxendon thought, he looks very tired. He must sleep some time and then they'll arrest him. She was not in the least self-conscious, but it did occur to her that her present position was peculiar since she had the greatest possible respect, not only for government in general, but for the Uruguayan President, whom she regarded as a statesman of great intelligence.

Only Jean, watching the dark head motionless below her, realized the anguish by which José Enrique was overpowered. For the first time in his life, probably, he doubted himself. Having grown up with his convictions, he couldn't bear to lose them. He wasn't even going to be allowed to die for his country. The police wouldn't shoot. There was no way he could prove

the belief which he dared not lose. He would lead no mighty demonstration against injustice. The scene had lost its drama. There was only one thing he could do to impress upon his emotional countrymen the finality of the President's action. Otherwise, they would be forced to submit to the new constitution.

José Enrique, blinded by his dreams of a worker's paradise, saw no hope in the reconstruction of a working state. In all sincerity, he decided on the final protest.

With a lithe, strong movement, he rose from the kerbstone and waving back the few adherents who would have accompanied him, he advanced into the middle of the street. His action revived the interest of the spectators. Beyond the horses of the mounted police, a crowd seemed to rise out of the ground.

José Enrique, erect and cool, a splendid figure of a man in spite of his dishevelled clothes, looked right and left along the street. Then he glanced up at the balcony and seeing Jean, he bowed to her with a sweeping gesture. His face was grave and his movements unhurried. Alone in the gathering dusk, he opened his coat, thrust his revolver against his heart and pulled the trigger.

Mrs. Wraxendon was the first person to move. In full possession of her wits, she dragged Jean bodily off the balcony and hurried her through the room and downstairs to the back entrance.

The girl was incapable of resistance. Hardly conscious of what was happening to her, she moved automatically, while spasms that were not yet sobs impeded her breathing, so that the only sound she could utter was a half-stifled "Why?"

Tony's hand closed on her arm. "It wasn't just

being dramatic," he said. "Don't you see, José wasn't going to have it said that the police had shot him. He intended to be a martyr, but he didn't want to put the onus of his murder on his opponents. He was off his head, I suppose, but, by God, he was damn decent!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE North wind gathered strength. It brought the sweltering langour of the tropics to the shores of the River Plate. It bent the trees and tore off great branches which it hurled across the streets. There was thunder among the dull, brownish waves and an artificial tide. The camp was a shifting mist of sand, blown like surf over the deep billows of grass and rushes.

In the Extraordinary House, there was continual movement. Shutters and doors banged. The woodwork became vocal. The curtain-rings rattled along the pole and the material swung back as if impelled by an imperious hand. The hangings stirred and whispered as the wind swelled their folds.

Mrs. Wraxendon, sitting in her usual place on the sofa, thought that all this confusion of sound was preferable to the silence in which her niece seemed to have lost herself. The girl refused to discuss any subject remotely connected with José Enrique. She didn't so much as mention his name. Yet her aunt knew that he was more real to her and possibly more important, now that he was dead. Having sought in vain to comfort the small, stiff person who appeared to be sheet-white in spite of her sunburn, Agnes took refuge from the silence she distrusted, in a flow of small talk. Jean did not respond, and her aunt thought what a pity it was that the very young had so few resources.

She was wondering how to deal with the situation when the bell at the gate rang.

Tony and George had been induced—most unwillingly—to play golf. Kay, who'd disappeared for half the day, was now in her room upstairs. She could be heard moving about with quick, restless steps.

"Who can it be?" said Mrs. Wraxendon as Lida propelled her ripe figure across the Hall. She was on the verge of saying she could see nobody when it occurred to her that any diversion might be good for Jean.

Consequently, after a number of indistinct sounds had roused the older woman's curiosity, heavy boots sounded on the tiles. With one spur trailing from a worn strap Sally came in, her face white and vague and her eyes wider than ever. As soon as she heard the other girl's voice Jean emerged from the deep chair in which she'd been sunk. "What's the matter?" she asked, omitting the usual greeting.

And Mrs. Wraxendon was startled to realize that she might as well not have been present. Neither young thing took the slightest notice of her. They stared at each other with strained faces and they spoke with voices to which she was unaccustomed. "Señor Bosco's going to-night. It's something to do with José Enrique's death. He's an Altruista, you know. I think he's afraid of being arrested."

Jean grasped immediately the full significance of this speech, and she knew also that the girl who made it had reached some desperate conclusion.

For once Sally's mind was divorced from horses. She said, "I came straight here," as if it were the inevitable thing to have done.

"Yes, of course," agreed Jean.

Agnes Wraxendon, listening to them, realized that she could do nothing. The gap was too wide. It was as if she heard a strange language, spoken by denizens of another world. As imperceptibly as possible she left the sitting-room and went upstairs.

The two girls remained on their feet. Sally was covered with fine, yellow dust. It hung heavy on her lashes and was caked round the corners of her mouth. A wisp of mouse-brown hair fell across her forehead. The stains on her bombachas were a history of the week's activities. Her boots were unpolished and one of them had split across the ankle. Yet none of these things mattered. There was in Sally a quality which dominated, while it ignored, the vagaries of her appearance.

" What do you want me to do ? " asked Jean, roused from her own misery by the other girl's need and taking it for granted that if there were something to be done it was she who would play the active part.

But Sally said : " Nothing. Nothing at all." A flicker of anxiety crossed her face. " I've left Lindy outside, but she won't mind. There's plenty to eat."

A vision of the cat-footed chestnut among the dahlias was less disturbing to Jean than the idea that Sally, in her present condition, had been bucketed across several miles of the roughest possible ground, astride a rocket which didn't even look where it was going. But her protests were ignored with, " It doesn't matter. There wasn't anyone else."

Sally's lips were grey, but it didn't occur to either girl to sit down. " I've come to see Mrs. Strang. I must see her at once," announced the younger.

" Oh yes. D'you think that'll do any good ? " said Jean, surprised. It seemed to her that Sally was in

no condition to stand up to Kay, or indeed, now she thought of it, to stand up at all. She pushed a chair towards her visitor. "I'll tell Kay you're here," she said, for she felt it was no use arguing.

All the vague obstinacy of Sally's nature was behind her unusual determination. There was in her also a queer impersonal jealousy, so that, her diffidence having disappeared, she didn't want anyone else to interfere. "No," she said softly, while the lines of her face and her lips seemed to take more definite shape, "I want to go up to her room alone." She turned towards the stairs, and before Jean could say anything she was clumping up them, the loose spur jingling.

Kay had spent a satisfactory morning with Jeremy. They'd intended to ride, but the wind had nearly blown them out of their saddles, so they'd tethered the horses under the lee of some bushes and sought shelter in the eucalyptus woods. In a hollow, deeply cushioned by twigs and fallen leaves, steeped in the penetrating scent, they had sat close together, talking quietly, content with their isolation. If Kay had thought of her age and Jeremy of his work, it had been no more than a passing reflection without power to spoil the hours that were intimately theirs.

While she moved about her room, that was also in some subtle fashion Elena's, Kay remembered the peace and completion of those moments which were not in any way connected with her ordinary existence. They were something extra vouchsafed to her by whatever gods made magic out of the chaos of human life. They couldn't be repeated. Perhaps they couldn't even be remembered, not for long, anyway. Kay sighed and thought of what she'd say to George. She'd tell him the truth. It was always the easiest thing to do. She

wondered if Elena had spoken the truth to Fernando. If so she was responsible for his death, but Englishmen didn't kill their wives' lovers.

At this moment there were footsteps in the passage, followed by a gentle knock. Into the room came Sally, without explanation or apology. A high-backed arm-chair was in her way, and on this the girl leaned while she said : "I've come about Jeremy."

It sounded so natural that Kay regretted the sharpness of her own voice, but she couldn't entirely control it as she retorted, "What about Jeremy?"

"I think it's me he likes—really I mean," said Sally, without moving.

Kay thought this is entirely absurd. It oughtn't to be happening; but as it is, and as I can't stop it, let it be as undramatic as possible. So she seated herself on the bed and said : "Can't Jeremy decide for himself?"

"No, I don't think so, not without me."

There was a pause. Kay found it impossible to combat the mist represented by Sally's speech. She waited therefore with an air of brisk impatience which she hoped would irritate the other into some statement open to attack. But the girl seemed to think she'd explained her position. In silence and without animosity, she regarded Kay.

After some time she said : "Of course, I do understand. You are lovely, even on a horse, but you do ride too long, I'm sure. I never have time. You see there's such a lot to do and it *is* rather dirty. There's not much water and it's never hot. Still, I know I ought to try." Sally's eyes were grave. "Does it matter so much, being lovely, I mean?"

To her own surprise Kay found herself answering

with equal honesty, " I expect it does, not always, of course, but generally, yes."

The ghost of a sigh broke from Sally's pink lips. " It's hard on Jeremy, of course, but I don't think, honestly, he'll be happy away from the estancia. He'll want all the things he's made. You know, he built the hen-houses. He's awfully clever with his hands."

Kay shivered as she thought of the long sensitive fingers that had loved her. She asked, " What has he told you ? Why've you come here ? "

Sally showed her surprise. " He hasn't told me anything. Why should he ? But I know you're going away together, and it's all a mistake. He won't be happy."

" How d'you know ? " Kay's voice rose with her annoyance.

The girl was so certain she spoke the truth that she didn't even trouble to be emphatic. Her words drifted, gentle and soft. All the lines of her face were drooping. She leaned heavily upon the chair. " I've always known about Jeremy, from the first moment I met him. You see, I love him." There could be no greater simplicity.

Kay felt tawdry beside it and to make matters worse she said : " I suppose you think you love him more than I do ? "

" Yes, I do," agreed Sally.

There was nothing more to be said.

Kay swung off the bed with a quick impatient movement. " So you've come to ask me to give him up ? " she insisted.

" He won't be happy without the horses, and there's the new workshop he's fitting up. It's got a proper

carpenter's bench. If you take him away he won't be the same a bit." The shadow of a smile touched Sally's lips. "I don't think you'll like him really." But her childish eyes were fierce. They said as clearly as if she'd spoken. "He's my sort, not yours. Can't you see it?"

Kay moved about the room, leaving damp marks on the things she touched. If only this cursed wind would drop. It threshed against the windows and shook the ceiling so that the cracks in it widened and a fat-bodied insect fell on to the dressing-table. With a feeling of violent distaste she flicked it into the waste-paper basket. "It's too late," she said and then, "You'll have to have it out with Jeremy."

Her manner indicated that the interview was at an end, but Sally drooped lower over the chair. "You mustn't make him unhappy," she said, and her face was like damp paper.

"What's the matter? Are you ill?" asked Kay sharply. If the girl was going to faint, or do anything stupid, she must get her out of the room. She must go anyway. She'd no right to have come.

With an effort Sally drew herself upright. "It's the heat, I suppose. We'll get another three days of it. I have got—a pain——" With her hand pressed against her stomach she turned. "Lindy was cross because I wouldn't let her gallop. She's tiring as a hack. Jeremy says it's my fault. I ought to sit forward. He can manage her. You know he'll miss too much. He really will."

Sally, on her way to the door, sagged forward and in another second she was a colourless and crumpled heap upon the floor.

Kay, to whom illness was generally an opportunity

for displaying more than her usual efficiency, felt she couldn't deal with this particular situation. Avoiding Sally's body, which occupied surprisingly little space, she wrenched open the door and called, "Jean, Jean! Come here at once."

With something of an effort Mrs. Wraxendon remained in her room. She heard her niece run upstairs, and she thought they are all very impetuous. It's much better they should work it out for themselves.

Jean, arriving breathless, to find Sally unconscious with her head on a cardboard box, flung herself on her knees and said: "I heard her fall! What happened? I hope she hasn't damaged herself!"

"Why should she?" said Kay, producing smelling-salts and water.

"Well, after all, she's going to have a baby?"

"What!" The bottle slid from Kay's fingers and a stream of aromatic crystals spread over the boards.

"Didn't she tell you!" exclaimed the girl, on her knees.

"No," said Kay in a dead voice.

Jean was so surprised that she stopped doing the wrong things to the senseless figure beside her. "But I thought that was what she came for!"

Clear-eyed, she stared at Kay who met her gaze squarely. "Well she didn't."

A half-smile stirred the girl's lips. "How like her and how lovely!" she said, without thought of the older woman.

"How stupid!" retorted Kay, but without venom, and in the same chilled tones, "It was a good weapon."

"Her only one!" said Jean fiercely.

"Oh no. She had others. Put her head lower. Here, sponge her forehead. She'll be all right if you keep her flat. Make her lie down—on my bed if you like. I'm going out."

CHAPTER XXII

IT was the third day of north wind, and Uruguay lay damp and gasping.

The oppression had reached its climax. In the camp no man gave an order if he could avoid it. The peons gathered in contumelious groups ready to avenge insult with a knife, or rode with drooping shoulders, their hats pulled over their eyes while they brooded over wrongs that existed only in their imagination.

In Montevideo the President was still entrenched in the fire-station, where his supporters worked collarless and in short-sleeves. The streets were patrolled and the cafés watched. Behind locked doors such Altruistas as remained at large desisted from the consideration of ineffective plans to curse the heat and each other for the tragedy of the preceding day. Revolvers were drawn, but no man had the energy to fire.

In Carrasco the beaches were deserted. Under the pines at Cavallini's the tables were stacked in scarlet heaps. Along the fine new roads between mimosa and fir and eucalyptus, there was a scuttle and rush of sand. The Indian corn was stripped and blossom torn from the creepers. In the shelter of their huts dark skinned, half-naked men sprawled full length among yellow pumpkin flowers and empty tins.

The Extraordinary House was shuttered and the windows closed, but the hangings rustled in the sitting-room and voices blew up and down the stairs. In the

artificial darkness of her bedroom Kay, with her hair clinging to her forehead and moisture beading in the hollow of her throat, was writing a letter. Her pen hurried across the paper, omitting words in order to keep up with the thoughts that directed it; but the woman was unconscious of her mistakes. She'd wanted a child. For all the years of her marriage she'd longed for a child, and now Sally was going to have one.

Kay was afraid lest she should lose control of the explicit and illusive words which were in and out of her brain while she sought to express with them all that she could never again say to Jeremy. Her lips were parted. A spot of colour burned on each cheek. She bent lower over the table. And she heard neither the knocking at her door nor her husband's voice in the passage. She went on writing, more than there was any hope of Jeremy understanding, more than any other woman in all his life would ever say or want to say to him. And when the letter was finished she thrust it into an envelope without reading it and sat staring at the wall, while she saw the long, white miles of beach across which she'd walked the previous evening. Then she hadn't known whether she was alive or dead. She'd ploughed through the rough sand, driven into ridges and hummocks, with all kinds of refuse flung up in the hollows. She hadn't even seen the dead birds and rotting timber. Her feet had carried her away from Sally's victory and her own defeat.

It seemed to her as she crushed the letter in a hot hand that she hadn't thought at all. There'd been no decision to make, for, before she'd left the house, she'd known what she had to do. She'd walked to escape from herself and the pain raging in every nerve.

She'd walked with her mind blank and her body a shell which the beating of her heart might break.

She'd returned with head high and a vague wonder as to whether she had command of her actions. The feelings of emptiness persisted. All through dinner, at which she'd been particularly brilliant, she'd imagined herself cauterized by fire. It was a strange, clean sensation like the first sting of a flesh wound.

Kay's hands unclenched. She smoothed the envelope on which the ink had run. So it was finished and there was nothing more for her.

George came back again. It was the third time he'd knocked on her door that morning. And on this occasion he rattled the handle till Kay, to whom at the moment all sound was unendurable, unlocked the door and let him in.

George was grey under his sunburn. His eyes had sunk into his head. The sockets were red and swollen. He stared at his wife without speaking.

"Well?" she asked impatiently.

"Why did you shut me out last night? I wanted to talk to you." The man's voice was brittle.

"I had nothing to say." Kay turned away from him and brushed her hand through her hair. Her vitality had gone. She dragged herself across the room and leaned against the bottom of her bed. Perhaps if she didn't sit down George would go. Then she could send her letter to Jeremy and it would be the end.

"But you must say something," insisted the man. He pulled at his collar. Above it his throat swelled. The north wind was sapping his reason, so that his flesh made exaggerated demands on him. It cried out to him and he couldn't disregard it. Half stifled by the heat and his own desires he said thickly: "I'm

not going to stand any more. You've got to tell me the truth."

Kay, with an infinity of weariness in her voice, said : " If you want to know, you can. I don't care. But you're a fool, because, once it's said, it'll always be between us."

" What d'you mean ? "

Their eyes met. They measured each other's strength, and when Kay spoke again, in gentler tones, it was a concession to her husband's need. " You wanted to go away," she said. " Well then, let's go—as soon as you like."

" To-night ? " asked George. " We can take the river boat."

Without reason Kay objected. " No, to-morrow," and she hadn't the least idea why she'd said it. She didn't even recognize her own voice.

" Why d'you want to put it off ? " asked her husband, divided between relief and anxiety.

Kay answered vaguely. The wind would've dropped. She'd got to pack. She was too tired to cope with it in this heat.

George, who was generally the mildest of men and who at the moment had no specific reason for losing his temper, swore violently and banged out of the room. Three minutes later he returned to say he would get the tickets. Lingering in the doorway with an indecision that exasperated his wife he added, " There's to be no more fool nonsense, d'you understand ? "

Kay said : " If you don't want to drive me mad you'd better get out and stay out."

For the rest of the day she was invisible. Having dispatched her letter to Jeremy, she took refuge behind a locked door, pleading headache. Jean was the only

one who asked for admittance and she was sent away.

Then, late in the afternoon, Jeremy rode up on a lathered horse and demanded to see Kay. Lida acted as intermediary, but without result. After considerable argument the young man went away wild-eyed and in the wrong direction.

Jean, feeling she ought to do something, carried up a tea-tray. A dead weight had settled in the pit of her stomach. It impeded thought and movement. The girl felt her limbs unwieldy and her brain stuffed with hot cotton-wool. But, momentarily, she was less conscious of her own misery than Kay's. She came close to the door and said, gently, "Do let me in. I want to talk to you so much . . ." and then she felt intolerably stupid for there was nothing she could possibly say and certainly nothing that Kay could want to hear. So she was relieved when the woman's voice, cool, deliberate and distant, said: "I've just taken some aspirin. I must rest for a bit. See you later."

Hot and humiliated Jean fled down the passage. She'd been doubly impertinent. The snub was deserved. But she'd had the same impulse to help as in the Calle Verde when José Enrique had asked her to marry him. In both cases she'd been frustrated. There was nothing she could do. Jean had never felt so useless. When she was half-way downstairs there was a crash of broken glass as a scullery window blew open. The wind whirled through the house. A door into the hall swung wide and a tall vase was swept from the table beside it. Hearing the clatter on the tiled floor Lida, with a face of brown paper and the name of a saint on her lips, picked up a dishcloth and came

running into the hall. She caught her foot on a stool and fell forward, so that the double weight of her was thrown against the chest at the bottom of the stairs. The hinges burst and the lid gaped open.

As the Indian pulled herself up, with a hand pressed to her loin, the girl on the bottom step could see into the case which had hitherto been closed and locked. It appeared to contain a medley of old clothes. They didn't look interesting so, having helped Lida to pick up the pieces of broken china, Jean was about to replace the lid when she caught a glimpse of steel through the fringe of a lime-green shawl. She pulled at the silk, with a sense of having seen it before and then she remembered that Kay had a similar wrap. The one in her hands was crumpled and spotted with dull brown. The stains had eaten right into the silk and moths had added to the damage. The thing wasn't worth keeping. With an inexplicable feeling of revulsion, Jean let the shawl slip into a heap in a corner of the chest. The object that had been entangled in the fringe was a pugna [1] with a finely engraved blade and a carved handle. Reluctantly the girl picked it up and touched the metal, deeply rusted at the point. She turned it to the light and then, with a shiver that was ice along her spine, she dropped it on to the clothes.

At that moment George came into the hall. He had the boat-tickets in his pocket and was feeling better. "Have you seen a ghost?" he asked, moving restlessly to relieve the damp pressure of the atmosphere.

Without thinking, Jean pointed to the knife. "It's got blood on it," she said.

"Nonsense!" George had recovered his senses and

[1] Camp man's knife.

his nationality and was therefore suspicious of anything unusual. He peered into the chest through spectacles misted with sand. "It needs cleaning, that's all." The obvious was in his opinion the safest and the most sensible thing to say. George was fed up with the Extraordinary House. He'd had enough of imagining things which weren't there, which couldn't possibly be there. So he shut the lid of the chest and said: "What about a cocktail? Look as if you need one. Where's Kay?"

"In her room. She's got a headache. You'd better leave her alone."

"Anyone turn up?" George tried to keep his voice casual.

"Only Jeremy, and he didn't get in."

There was a pause, in which the wind contrived to imply all that the man and the girl had so studiously avoided saying. Jean moved her shoulders which were sticking to her thin blouse. "It's suffocating, isn't it?" she remarked with too much emphasis.

"It'll blow itself out to-night," retorted George.

But Jean said nothing. She was wondering what would happen before the north wind dropped.

At dinner, from which Kay was absent, Mrs. Wraxendon took charge of the conversation. She had received letters from England, and it seemed to her their contents constituted the only innocuous subject she could select. She found an unexpected ally in Jean who reluctantly admitted the measure of Kay's loss, so that her anxiety was principally concerned with whether George would make a fool of himself in the twenty-four hours that remained before he could get his wife out of the country. Consequently, when Mrs. Wraxendon said, "I think we'd better all go down to

the Casino. It's the coolest place in Carrasco," her niece surprisingly agreed.

George attempted to make excuses, but three determined people opposed their common sense to his formless apprehensions, with the result that he found himself guiding Mrs. Wraxendon through the shrieking tangle of branches, into which the garden had degenerated. "Now I know what it's like to be pulled through a hedge backwards," said Agnes who disliked platitudes, but felt that under the circumstances each one she uttered was a score against the extravagance of fate.

For some time after they reached the Casino she succeeded in keeping George at her side, but the rooms were crowded. Half the population of Carrasco had sought refuge within their solid walls. Here was no echo of the north wind, wreaking its final destruction. The thick red carpets deadened the sound of steps. The light from the huge crystal chandeliers was reflected in mirrors and in the gilt on the panels. Smoothly brown or amber women, with glistening skins and hair plastered close about their heads, sat motionless at the baccarat table or hung above it with eyes fixed on the shoe. Coffee-dark men moved from one group to another with sheaves of notes, or counters, in their hands.

The atmosphere was gay, for, since the slump in cattle and wool, gambling had ceased to be a business.

Mrs. Wraxendon's bank had a run of luck. She was amused and decided to see how long it would last. Having dealt herself a succession of naturals she became absorbed in the game, and for the moment forgot to watch George. When, at the eighth hand, her opponent drew a three to a four and defeated her, she smilingly relinquished the shoe and spoke to the

man whom she believed at her shoulder. "That was fun, wasn't it?"

Receiving no answer she glanced round and found a German with an eyeglass had taken George's place. She might've pursued her guest, although it would've been difficult to find anyone in such a crowd, had she not, at that moment, been startled by the appearance of Jeremy. Neither of the Ingworths were gamblers. Sally boasted that she'd never so much as seen the inside of the Casino, yet here was Jeremy, haggard and careless, playing with sums that made the rest of the table gasp.

He was winning. Nobody could touch his bank. It ran until, with an exclamation of impatience, he indicated that it was for sale.

He got up and, sweeping his money into his pocket without even looking at it, he stood staring across the table. His eyes went to the clock, a great gilt affair, whose ticking seemed to dominate the room. Other glances followed Jeremy's. It was five minutes after midnight.

An elderly Uruguayan, standing near Mrs. Wraxendon, peered from the young man's strained face to the hands of the timepiece and dropped his monocle when he saw the hour. "A coincidence!" he muttered, hesitated, shrugged and moved rapidly away.

Jeremy was unconscious of the interest he'd aroused. Unable to endure the quiet of the estancia, where Sally's eyes followed him about the too familiar rooms, he'd come to the Casino to kill time, or to forget it, but really, of course, to see Kay. It was his only chance and she wasn't there. He'd looked everywhere. He'd seen Tony and Jean trying a system at the roulette table and George talking, quietly enough, to a stranger in the

bar. He'd taken a bank at Chemmy to try his luck and had been aware of Mrs. Wraxendon's presence without exactly noticing it. So they were all in the rooms except Kay. She must be alone at the Extraordinary House.

Jeremy looked at the clock, although he'd no conscious desire to know the time. Then impulse took possession of him and he was no longer wholly himself. With his hand clenched in his pocket he went out of the room, seeing nobody in it and conscious only that he must get to Kay.

Jean, turning from the roulette table where the system had not been successful, saw him in the distance and caught hold of Tony's arm. "Jeremy's here!" she said, while she watched the tall figure pushing its way through the crowd.

"Well, it's about the best place he could be," remarked Tony, his interest on the wheel.

"But he's going!" exclaimed Jean, disturbed by illogical panic. She also looked at the clock, and when she saw the time a stifled cry broke from her. "Look! Look!" She pulled at the arm she still held and Tony, intent on his calculations, for the system was complicated, asked, "Look where?"

Jean's hold relaxed. "I don't know," she said. "It was the time I suddenly felt there was something odd about it, but there isn't, really, of course."

Impressed by the quality of her voice the man turned to her, "What's the matter?"

Jean's face was white. "I don't know," she said. "But I'm awfully afraid. Where's George?"

"In the bar. He's found somebody who was in the same sector in 1917. You know what that means. They'll be at it all night."

Jean said : " I must go and see. I've got to be sure."

She was already moving when Tony stopped her. " I don't know what you're after, but you can't go trailing round the bar. Stop here and keep your eye on this." He thrust a list of numbers into her hand. " I'll have a look at George and report whether it's Ypres or the Somme."

He was gone before the girl could say anything, and she stood, holding the paper, with her back to the table while the money they'd staked *en plein* multiplied itself thirty-five times.

She waited with her eyes on the clock, and long before Tony returned she knew what he was going to say. With an intolerable impatience she watched the young man making his way through the crowd. " Well, was he there ? "

" Gone ! " said Tony. " Not a sign of him ! "

Then Jean hesitated no longer. " Don't bother about the money. Come at once. It's going to happen again. I told you so."

CHAPTER XXIII

WHEN Jeremy left the Casino the wind was dropping, but damp heat hung in the air and the pressure of it was suffocating. The man thought it couldn't be worse in the tropics, and it seemed to him there was a smell of decay under the trees. He remembered swamps in Venezuela, where for centuries the rotting vegetation has given birth to innumerable parasite growths. The last breath of the Norther shaking silver from the eucalyptus, reeked of the jungle, where life grows out of death.

Jeremy, usually impervious to climate, felt he was pushing his way through a darkness so thick that it acquired shape and substance; it laid hot hands on him and clung with dripping fingers. Impatiently he quickened his steps till the perspiration made an outer skin of his shirt, and he arrived at the Extraordinary House with moisture breaking from every pore.

The gate was shut and nobody answered the bell. Jeremy could hear it ringing. It was a thread of sound, like a mosquito droning shrilly against a net. After a few minutes he gave up the attempt to draw attention to his presence, and climbing the gate, without too much difficulty, for he was active and the spikes which took toll of his coat were fortunately blunted, he tried the doors of the house. Both were locked. He was wondering whether he should throw pebbles at each

window in turn, or attempt to climb by way of the porch to the balcony above it, when he noticed a pane of broken glass. It was easy enough to put his hand through it and open the catch. In another moment he had vaulted the sill and was in the scullery. With his heart beating in his throat and an extraordinary excitement surging through his veins, so that while he was keenly aware of himself and his purpose he was stirred also by strange, dark impulses which had nothing to do with him, he moved quietly into the sitting-room.

The lights had been extinguished. Jeremy was obliged to feel his way up the stairs, and it was as he climbed them, step by step, that he began to lose consciousness of his own individuality. Wilder passions than he'd ever known shook his body and suffused his brain. By the time he reached the landing, on which it seemed to him formless footsteps followed his own, there was in him a dual purpose. He had to see Kay whom he loved, but he had also to take from a woman something vital to him. There was poison in his blood. Without the woman he couldn't live. His need was so desperate that he stumbled down the passage and almost fell against the door, to which he felt he'd been guided. The sound echoed through the house, and when Kay's voice asked sharply, "Who is it?" Jeremy, in the grip of extraneous forces, was not surprised that he had come to the right room.

"Let me in . . . ! I must see you," he urged, twisting the handle.

There was a silence, in which the whole house seemed to wait with breath suspended. Then the door opened and Kay's figure was a thickening of the darkness on the threshold.

Jeremy, blundering forward, tried to catch hold of her, but she eluded him and turned on the light. "You're mad to come here," she said in a sombre voice, and then she saw his expression and the words she'd intended to say were meaningless.

"What is it?" Kay stood very still, wrapped in her lime-green shawl, while Jeremy closed the door and leaned against it.

"I don't know," he said thickly and then, "You didn't expect me to let you go . . ." All this was unimportant. What was the use of wasting words? Jeremy, seeing with another man's eyes, said things which appeared to him irrelevant yet essential, and to his amazement he spoke in Spanish.

Kay had become somebody unfamiliar, yet his need of her increased. It was fire and acid in his blood. Irresistibly he was borne forward, and the woman whom he'd known and loved, but whom he desired as a stranger, struggled in his arms. He heard Kay's voice, studiously quiet, but it was not her lips he kissed. A stronger will than his was directing the actions over which he'd no longer any control.

George had left the Casino a few minutes before Jeremy and he didn't know why he'd done so. The air in the bar had been insupportably stale, but the man he'd been talking to had the right sort of ideas. It'd been pleasant enough to meet a fellow, hall-marked by school and regiment. George had lived an unusual life, in countries where there is neither precedent nor precept, yet he had not lost his instinctive distrust of originality. The usual was to him agreeable. So, as he went round by the avenida, in the hope that it would be cooler beside the Plate, his

thoughts were occupied with the War. The fellow, whose name had already slipped his mind, although such of the man's history as he'd heard was satisfactorily familiar to him, since it coincided with his own, the fellow, then—George found it difficult to correlate his thoughts while he was being slowly stifled by a damp cloth. He made gestures at the air, which closed in on him. It was a Turkish bath and there was no way of getting out. Well, the fellow had evidently known what he was talking about. That first gas attack. . . . George, loitering on the edge of the beach, listening to the waves he couldn't see, or panting up the sandy lane, was back in Flanders. The cloying sweetness of the gums was the breath of gas. He fumbled with the lock of the gate while his nostrils contracted. Curious, how one always remembered. It seemed to him as he crossed the strip of garden and searched for the latch-key among the oddments which always encumbered his pockets, that the spent wind was the whine of shells, and the rustle of the stripped grey leaves the slither of steps in a night attack.

So it was with no thought of Kay, but rather with the wish that he'd had another drink with the fellow who knew about gas, that he entered the Extraordinary House and was immediately alert. His brain cleared. There was no longer any place in it for the War, or the man at the Casino. It was as if he took possession of somebody else's mind. He saw everything in detail, which was not at all his habit, and he was surprised because the objects in the hall, which hitherto he'd scarcely noticed, were of sudden and significant importance.

At the foot of the stairs an Indian was bending over

an open chest. George didn't remember having seen her before, but he knew her at once for his wife's foster-mother—but that, of course, was absurd ! The woman looked up and words framed on her lips although no sound came from them. In her hand was a knife, rusted at the point. She let it fall on to a lime-green shawl. Both substances seemed to George excessively familiar.

" What are you doing ? " he asked, and he understood her reply concerning the wind and the heat, the conjunction of which was responsible for nameless forebodings—and then the chest was open. For ten years it had been locked. The Indian paused and stared with secretive eyes at George. He was an Englishman, ignorant of women, with no thought for what, at this very moment, his wife was doing.

The Indian, driven by the restlessness which the north wind had induced in all those of her blood, products originally of the forest from which it blew, driven also by incomprehensible premonitions, had wandered about the house waiting and watching, lest in the present she should repeat the mistake of the past. She'd been on the landing when Jeremy had blundered into Kay's room and, remembering how the lid of the chest had been broken open, she'd gone down slowly, with fear stiffening her lips, to see what had happened to the knife.

It seemed to her natural that George should take it from where it lay, and she made no protest when he went upstairs with the pugna in his hand. She noticed that he held it like one of her own people, or a camp-man accustomed to the upward thrust. And she followed softly, with a prayer to aboriginal gods.

A streak of light lay under Kay's door. When he saw it, George's hand clenched on the weapon he held. In his mind there was a needle-point of rage. It was not connected with himself, but he felt it piercing his forehead. It broke against his eyeballs and the red splinters impeded his vision. Outside the door he paused. It seemed to him that he had no strength to open it. All the purpose of his body was concentrated in his right hand. He heard the confused sounds in Kay's room and he knew what they meant, but still he hesitated as if waiting for a signal.

The Indian woman crept to his side, but he was not aware of her, nor did he hear the front door open and the voices in the hall. His ears were strained for something that he knew would come.

A few feet away from him, Kay, crushed in Jeremy's arms, was fighting a stranger. Afraid and fully conscious of the reasons for her fear, she was forced back upon the bed, but she wouldn't cry out. At all costs she would make no sound. She dragged one hand free and pressed it across her mouth. An unknown face was against her own. She shut her eyes.

In the passage two people heard the scream Kay had not uttered and the echo of it drifted down to Jean and Tony as they stood in the dimly lit hall, listening for the sounds which must inevitably come from above.

As soon as George heard the cry, which was already ringing in his brain, he flung open the door, saw the confused figures on the bed and rushed at them. In that moment he was twice his own size. His muscles were whipcord and his bones steel. The strength of a gaucho was his and the rage of madness. Seeing only a woman in an old shawl, yet one whose immeasur-

able beauty was most intimately his, in the grip of a man, dark, without form or feature, he raised the knife to drive it into the familiar place between his enemy's shoulder-blades. But the Indian flung herself upon his arm. She clung to it so that his aim was diverted and the knife slipped over Jeremy's back. His thin coat was ripped by the blade and blood spurted through the tear. It dripped on to Kay's shawl. And when Jean and Tony burst into the room, they found the woman huddled against a reddened pillow and Jeremy struggling to his feet.

In front of them, George, unrecognizable, was freeing his arm from the shrivelled creature who hung on to it while she shrieked.

Tony hurled himself forward. His flying tackle caught George round the knees and the three of them came down together. The Indian twisted herself free and backed against the wall, where she stood motionless with her arms outstretched. The knife had fallen and Tony thrust it out of reach as George, still possessed of another man's strength, heaved himself away from his opponent. There was an untidy struggle, in which Jeremy, bleeding profusely, took part. Then George caught his foot in a torn rug and crashed backwards, with his head on the sharp edge of a drawer that was not quite shut.

He lay where he fell and in the subsequent silence, each person regained, not only a sense of reality, but a consciousness of his, or her, own character.

Jean, who had been watching a struggle between the Duke and Fernando, found herself with feet and hands illogically cold staring at George. Except for his dishevelled clothes, he looked much as usual, although, quite possibly, he was dead.

Then she remembered he should have been knifed, for she couldn't imagine the Duke flooring Fernando with a Rugby tackle. Relief filled her mind and from it spread tingling through her body. There was nothing supernatural about the scene. The north wind had lived up to its reputation. It made killers of the most ordinary men. Neat, quiet little George, whose brain was not unlike a well-kept ledger, had fallen a victim to it. The house had nothing to do with the affair. For there was no repetition of the past, wherein the lover of another brown and brilliant woman had murdered her husband, instead of being himself attacked and bleeding all over the lady's best shawl.

Jean's glance went from the faded lime-green silk to the Indian who still leaned against the wall in the position of one crucified. Their eyes met. There was such agony of terror in the mask which had taken the place of the washerwoman's usual countenance that Jean hurried into speech. "It's all right," she said, intending to reassure herself as well as the Indian.

"And what is right when murder repeats itself in the same room?" exclaimed the woman. Only her lips moved. "It is the same I tell you! The first time, I waited too long, for I had heard so many screams, but, to-night, when she cry out, I follow Don Fernando into the room. . . ."

Kay had been listening. "I didn't call. I didn't make a sound . . ." she said.

Jean stared at her. "We all heard you."

"I tell you I didn't open my mouth—I wouldn't."

The Indian nodded. "It was Doña Elena who shrieked and this time I try to stop the killing. . . ." Her eyes widened, but their stare remained fixed.

Jean wanted to shake her. "But it's entirely different! Can't you see?"

The woman's gaze passed over the recumbent figure as if it did not exist. "It is the same," she insisted. "I knew it was going to happen and that is why I was ready." With a swift scutter of steps, she was at the door. Turning, she cast a look at George, who was already moving, muttered, "For what should he die? It is the other . . ." and was running down the passage as if pursued by the ghost of Fernando.

"Mad!" said Jean, blankly. "She must be mad." Then she realized the others were looking at her. They had all shrunk in size. Except for George, prostrate and groaning as Tony dashed water over his face, they were ordinary people, tired, hot and ashamed of themselves because they'd been behaving in such an unusual fashion. "I'm damned sorry," said Jeremy with the utmost awkwardness. "It was my fault—I really don't know . . ." He put a hand to his back and brought it away red. Staring at it stupidly, he said, "I'd better be going . . ." and stood where he was.

Kay dragged herself off the bed. "You can't go like that."

George was sitting up. "By Jove, I got a knock," he said in a mild voice. "I say, what's up?" Bewildered, he looked from one face to another, "What's Ingworth doing here?"

"He came in with us," said Tony quickly. "We heard you fall and rushed upstairs."

With a swift movement of her heel, Kay pushed the knife under the bed.

"I feel as if I'd had a hell of a fight," said George, whose mind was still concerned with gas. He'd no

idea how he'd got into the room. He remembered the difficulty he'd had with his latch-key—one over the odds, he reflected. Kay was looking at him gravely. "A fight with a ghost," she said.

The two young men went out of the room, Jeremy protesting, "It's nothing, only flesh deep." Tony's mumbled ". . . making enough mess, what! I'm going to have a look at it anyway," drifted down the passage.

"What've you done with your shawl?" asked George, scrambling to his feet. "I say the wind's dropped at last." In the stillness which beat against their ear-drums, more insistent than any amount of noise, the slither of Kay's shawl as it fell across the stained pillow, already on the floor, was like a page turning.

Jean, half way to the door, thought, now we shall never know what happened. The sensation of finality went with her down the stairs. The curtains hung motionless. Not a sound broke the quiet of the Extraordinary House.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE Strangs had caught the previous night's boat to Buenos Aires. Jeremy and Sally were left to pick up the pieces of themselves and see how far they could mend them. That they would do so with as little explanation as possible was certain.

Jean, strolling with Tony along the beach, still littered with the spoils of the gale, but satin-smooth where the neatly frilled waves splashed upon succeeding semicircles of iridescence, said, " D'you think it'll be all right with those two ? "

" Which two ? " asked Tony with considerable sense.

" Oh, of course, Kay will make it all right. It's her job, and she's efficient. All her life's been a job—odd, George going completely daft and then forgetting all about it." Jean glanced sideways at her companion, but gathered nothing from his expression.

" There's been a lot of odd things . . ." said Tony. Neither of them were keen on corroborating their ideas by expressing them. So they took refuge in talking about the Ingworths. " Sally won't say anything at all," concluded the man. " And Jeremy will be first irritated by her silence and then relieved by it. In the end he'll forget there was anything to talk about."

Jean looked at the wide, white beach between the

mimosa bushes and the sea. It was deserted except for a battalion of gulls, standing rigidly to attention, each on a scarlet leg. The air was thin and the sky a tenuous blue, dissolving on the horizon into colourless clarity. The trunks of the eucalyptus were stained carmine and their leaves drooped in tatters. Everything was clearly defined. Yet it seemed as if a breath would be sufficient to break the glass in which were imprisoned the pallor of sand and sea, the bleached boats turned on their sides to dry, the whiteness of the dunes and the different whiteness which frosted the firs and drifted across the grass.

Jean flung out her arms and tilted her head back so that the sun was on her face. On a day like this she felt she could be happy so long as she didn't think, but Tony was saying, "Look here, I must ask you one thing before I go up-country."

"What d'you mean? Where are you going?" The girl found herself jerked back to reality and she didn't like the sensation. "It seems José Enrique spoke to his manager about me when we were all at the estancia. I can have the job I wanted."

"Oh, Tony, that's good." She hoped for a reprieve. So she infused as much warmth as possible into her voice and she talked quickly about the life of the camp, but Tony interrupted. With his eyes on the sand which he didn't see, he asked, "Were you engaged?"

There was silence. Jean gazed at the crystal-clear space upon which neither form nor colour impinged, and Tony, after some hesitation, added, "That's all I want to know."

The girl gathered her forces for what was required of her. It was time she faced things instead of push-

ing them away out of sight. All her life, she'd refrained from disturbing the accumulated litter of unpleasant experiences. Now Tony was obliging her to extract from the heap the most important substance in it and by so doing judge of its power to hurt her. She said : " We got engaged in the middle of the Calle Verde a few hours before he shot himself."

" I see," said Tony, and walked on.

" No, you don't see—not at all," retorted Jean, and with sudden courage she upset the whole mass of disagreeable memories and regarded them strewn at her feet. " It wasn't that I was in love with him, for I didn't know the first thing about him. Which was the real José ? Does anyone know ? But I was so little in love with myself that I wanted to get rid of me at any cost. D'you understand ? I wanted to lose myself, and how could I do it better than by marrying José Enrique ? "

Tony looked at her gravely, but he didn't say anything. In front of the big hotel, where a few gaily striped tents were being replaced and sun umbrellas flaunted their garish colours, Jean said : " Of course, I admired him and was interested, enthralled if you like. I was everything except in love and that last day . . . oh, well, I'd've died most gladly, there, in the street. You felt it too, didn't you ? "

" Yes," said Tony. He'd always been affected by the Uruguayan and he didn't want to talk about him. He just wanted to know how Jean felt, and being a persistent young man, he decided to give her a year. He said : " You won't be able to stand England after all that's happened out here. You'll have to come back."

" Yes, I shall come back." There was no doubt

in Jean's mind. She, who had never made the most unimportant decision unless it were forced upon her, found it easy to determine her future. Her thoughts were no longer sheep, following a conventional path. As antelope, they scoured the desert, making boldly for a distant oasis.

Tony's face showed nothing of what he felt. An amiable grin spread from ear to ear as he watched a ponderous lady, who presented the same curves going as coming, being playful in eighteen inches of water. "What about getting back?" he suggested. "The men are supposed to start on the well this morning and I'd rather like to see what they fish up."

Jean, disconcerted by the change of subject, asked abruptly, "D'you think it was the house, or the north wind?"

Tony knew what she meant. "Was it necessarily either?" he parried as they left the beach and turned into one of the avenues where, under the interlacing branches, the light splintered into red and silver.

"You know perfectly well it wasn't us, not as we really are. Can you see Jeremy attempting rape and George a typical camp murder? Why, he wouldn't even know how to hold a knife like that."

Tony reflected. "Rape?" he questioned. "D'you think that was the explanation?"

"Of what?"

"The Laretez affair."

"How could it be? They've been together ever since."

Tony shrugged his shoulders. He was more interested in the future than the past. "We've done a

whole lot of imagining," he said. "Why not let it go at that?"

But Jean was puzzling over the stories that wouldn't fit. She said: "We're different. Don't you realize it?"

"How are you different?" Tony looked at her with appreciation. For the first time he noticed and appraised the character in her face.

"I've ceased to be afraid," said Jean. The man protested, but she continued. "That's important, for my life was made hideous by fear. I dare say it's easy enough to be brave in a stupendous moment when one's altogether above oneself. For, after all, physical courage is largely a matter of nerves. But it's awful to live with an infinity of apprehensions; to be sick with fear of wretched, insignificant things that oughtn't to hurt at all. God! What a coward I've been!"

Tony interposed. "If that's true, I'd like to know what's put some sense into you at last."

"The Extraordinary House," retorted Jean. "It's acted as a microscope."

"What d'you mean?"

"Well, it's difficult to explain. But you know lots of houses do have quite definite personalities, independent of the people who live in them. Generally, I acknowledge, they're old houses which, through the centuries, have added up the sum total of experience. But I suppose it's possible to compress into a few years the emotions of many lives, and that's what's happened in the case of the Extraordinary House. Not time, but intensity of feeling, has developed its personality. D'you understand? I dare say it sounds silly, but my idea is that the house has acquired an unusual

sense of values owing to its connection with an outsize in human relationships. It won't admit the ordinary superficialities. It stripped us bare of pretence and developed our real qualities, magnifying them so that we had to recognize and live up to them. You've heard George repeat that the War brought out the best and the worst. Well, that's what the house did to us. It showed us the truth about ourselves."

Tony laughed and it was, as usual, a very pleasant sound. "I can't see that I'm any different," he said.

"I think you're more definite, but . . ." Jean had a moment of inspiration, "fundamentally there was nothing in you to change, for, unlike the rest of us, you were always—and sometimes quite exasperatingly —sincere." She smiled. "So the microscope only showed what we already knew you were."

At the garden gate, Mrs. Wraxendon waited with more impatience than she would have admitted in England, or than she had hitherto experienced under the influence of the Extraordinary House. As soon as she saw the two slight figures strolling up the lane, she came out and waved her parasol. When they were within hearing, she called to them. "I'm so glad you've come back. I can do nothing with the men. They just won't work." She glanced up at the sky. "There's not a single cloud. What shall we do?"

In the garden, two or three copper-coloured figures were trying to make themselves as inconspicuous as possible. The remonstrances of the Gallego [1] in charge

[1] Galician. Locally, the word is applied to a Spanish immigrant.

had no effect on them unless it were to make them spit with greater force and accuracy. They hung about under the trees and averted their eyes from the well with which they should have been concerned.

"They've got it into their heads it's haunted and they don't want to disturb the ghost," explained Agnes with considerable indignation, for her flowers were suffering. She couldn't bear to see the dahlias lose their stiffness and the hibiscus crumble into scarlet rags.

Tony whistled. "Why particularly the well? I knew they gave the whole place a wide berth after dark, but I don't see why the ghost should concentrate among a heap of old cans!"

The Gallego came forward. His shirt was neatly tucked into his trousers and to emphasize a social distinction he wore braces instead of a belt. In rapid Spanish, he explained that an evil influence had prevailed upon the men. Yesterday, they'd been willing enough to work, but a witch of an old woman had been talking to them. In spite of his braces and the superiority of his Spanish blood, he made the sign of the evil eye. The crone had spoken a dialect he couldn't understand, but at her first words, the men had dropped their tools. They'd retreated from the well as if it were a snake. See now, they wouldn't turn their backs on it, but nothing would induce them to touch a brick of it.

When Tony translated the gardener's eloquence, Jean showed surprise and Mrs. Wraxendon attempted to look blank. There was a momentary silence in which the young man's eyes asked, d'you know what's down that well? And the middle-aged woman's refused

to answer. Then Tony said : "Well, I'd better have a talk with them."

With his hands in his pockets, he wandered up to the workmen, talked about the weather, chaffed them, asked for a tip on a forthcoming race and eventually brought the conversation round to their work. As soon as he mentioned the well, the dark-skinned men, with crumpled and secretive faces, became blocks of wood. Not one of them would utter a word. Tony offered to double their wages and they slunk still further from their original objective. "Come, out with it!" urged the Englishman at last. "What are you frightened of? You're not children, or cowards. Give a name to what's got you beat."

There was a sulky muttering among the peons. One of them, who'd been drinking, made a gesture towards his knife. But Tony stood there, unconcerned, his shoulders hunched forward and a smile on his lips. "Well, what is it?"

"The devil's in that well," returned an old man, whose skin was the colour and texture of bark. "If you knew what has been told us, you would not stay here alive. . . ." He paused and looked round at his companions. Apparently, he gained courage from their expressionless faces. "If you touch that well," he continued, "it is your ghosts that will remain, cursed like the spirit of Don Fernando!"

There was a murmur from the peons and a susurrus of small, dry sounds as the men shifted their positions. Then, while Tony was still protesting, they were gone, silently and without a backward glance.

"So that's that!" said Agnes with finality.

"I'm damned if it is!" exploded the young man. "I'm going to find out what's at the bottom. . . ."

He stopped abruptly, warned by Mrs. Wraxendon's expression.

Jean was silent and not particularly interested. Events had moved so quickly that she was still confused between the emotions following upon José's death and the more complicated agitations induced by the behaviour of Jeremy and the Strangs. Familiar with the superstitions surrounding the Extraordinary House, she found it natural that they should have been disseminated by Elena's foster-mother. The woman had recently taken part in what threatened to be a recurrence of the ten-year-old tragedy. Terrified by the thought of any further interference with the past, she'd determined the well should remain as inviolate as the rest of the house.

Leaving her aunt and Tony to talk in conspiratorial voices, under what was left of the acacias, Jean went indoors, wondering whether she could induce the Indian to tell her the story of that other night when her interference might have prevented a murder.

On the landing, from which a small window looked on to the garden, a figure crouched beside a bundle of clothes. Disturbed by the girl's steps, the washerwoman, shrivelled, it seemed, to half her usual size, rose swiftly and confronted her interlocutor. For Jean's "What is it? What are you looking at?" had hardly left her lips, when the Indian broke into a strange mixture of words, from which it was only possible to extricate a threat of what would happen if the well were opened. The girl had not often seen fear naked and she recognized it now for an ugly thing. She didn't want to question the woman who stood there with pewter-coloured lips rolled back and eyes that saw nothing but their own dread.

She was relieved when the Indian slipped past her, oblivious of the washing scattered over the landing.

Outside, in the thin sunshine, Mrs. Wraxendon and Tony were moving slowly across the grass. The Gallego followed with some tackle. Their appearance was comfortably normal. Jean watched the fair young man as he bent towards her aunt. He was evidently using all his powers of persuasion. Mrs. Wraxendon gave in with a smile and her niece was pleased. She wanted Tony to have his way. Laughing to herself and immensely surprised that she could do so, Jean went down the passage. In her own room, she began to write a letter to her father and stopped to consider her plans which were not at all concerned with England.

In the garden, Mrs. Wraxendon was saying, "Well, if you must do it, be careful. It would be ludicrous to have two sets of bones down there."

"How sure you are!" expostulated Tony. "It's only a wild guess, but I'd like to have a squint all the same."

"Have a good look," retorted Agnes, calm and capable, her parasol open, her gardening-gloves newly washed. "But don't bring anything up."

Tony raised questing brows. "Don't you want to be sure it's Don Fernando and not a stray dog?"

"I'll take your word for it."

Subsequent to this conversation, Tony and the Gallego, a sufficiently recent emigrant to be unaffected by local superstition, fixed an amateur arrangement of rope and pulleys over the arch of the well. With a final glance into the depths, the former prepared to descend. He carried a lantern and a pick. "If the

air's foul, the candle'll go out," he told the gardener. "Watch for the flicker and pull me up at once. I'll shout, of course."

With one foot in a loop and a cord cradling his shoulders, he was lowered slowly out of sight. Mrs. Wraxendon impeded the usefulness of the Gallego by leaning so far over the edge that neither of them could see anything. A hollow voice boomed up to them. It sounded reassuring.

"There's generally water at the bottom," explained the Gallego. "I've never seen it dry."

There followed tinny noises and the clatter of the pick on thin metal. "Without doubt, there's a lot of rubbish in the well," ruminated the gardener. "For years it has been a convenient hiding-place for all that the house didn't want."

Mrs. Wraxendon, making sense of the last few words, thought they were surprisingly apposite.

The tension increased as the sounds at the bottom of the well became confused and finally ceased. There was a pause while Agnes hung breathlessly over the wall and the gardener prepared to throw his weight on the rope. Both shouted to Tony, but there was no answer.

Mrs. Wraxendon, disturbed by a sensation to which she was entirely unaccustomed, for fear had had no place in her rather splendid life, began to wonder whether her curiosity had for once got the better of her common sense. Then the signal came. As soon as he felt the jerk, the Gallego began to pull. With his muscular body flung backwards, he hauled on the rope, hand over hand. Yet it seemed to Agnes a long time before Tony, very dirty and grey about the lips and nostrils, came into sight. "There

was a terrific stench down there," he said, as he climbed over the wall. "Whew! I'm not sorry that's over."

"What did you find?" asked two voices at once.

To the gardener, Tony said: "Not a drop of water and not a ghost either!" He clapped the man on the back and a note changed hands. "Good fellow, that! But he'll have to try his saints for rain. There's nothing doing underground."

Mrs. Wraxendon remained impassive. She waited to say suitable things to the Gallego and was still talking about flowers as she and Tony walked back across the garden. But she interrupted a sentence concerned with herbaceous plants to say, "So you found what we expected."

Her companion looked disconcerted. "How did you know?"

Agnes did not smile. The constant surprise of the young no longer seemed to her amusing. She thought life became much more important towards its end, when it could be lived from inside. But she said politely: "Since the unpleasant occurrences of the other night when both Mr. Ingworth and Mr. Strang seem to have taken leave of their senses, I've naturally given some thought to the reason for such strange behaviour and I can only find it in the influence of the house. It is very concentrated. That old washer-woman has been driven half-mad by a conflict of emotions, I should say, loyalty and fear. When she deliberately frightened away those peons, I was sure the explanation lay in the well."

Agnes bent to tie up some trailing plants. Unhurried, she proceeded up the path.

"It did," said Tony, "and it was an awful mess."

"Bones?" queried Mrs. Wraxendon, as, with a careful toe, she persuaded out of her way a frog who had lost his own.

"The whole caboodle! And suited to the size of Fernando. The skull had got into a petrol-tin and the rest was mixed up with a whole lot of litter. It's evidently been the household dump for years. I should say the water's only just gone."

Mrs. Wraxendon maintained a reflective silence.

"What are you going to do about it?" asked Tony.

"Nothing," retorted his hostess, to whom it seemed that inaction was invariably the wisest course.

"Oh, but I say, there's the police and all that." Since he'd come to Uruguay, Tony had developed all sorts of civic instincts of which he'd hitherto been unaware.

"I've regretted many things I've said, but never what I've left unsaid," returned Agnes, as if the subject were closed.

But Tony thrust out his hand. It was an awkward gesture and it forced Mrs. Wraxendon to look at the grimy palm on which a ring was displayed. "I found that on the right little finger . . . it must've been fairly embedded. I'd some difficulty in getting it off the bone."

Agnes drew a sharp breath. For a moment her smooth cheeks were stained with pink. Then she took the jewel between gloved fingers and turned it so that the light drew colour from the stone. "This is the kind of proof to which only the Laretez have a right," she said, and her voice was very gentle. She thought of the past as something precious, in her hands to

preserve or destroy. "Let us agree to be silent," she said; "we can do no good by talking." The ring gleamed on her white glove, staining it with the red of wine and roses.

CHAPTER XXV

SOME weeks later, when Jean had returned to England insisting that it was only a temporary visit, and Tony had begun work on the Laretez estancia, Mrs. Wraxendon drove into Montevideo to call on Doña Maria. She knew her visit would break into the ceremonial mourning that secluded the mother of José Enrique, but she had prepared her way with a letter. Consequently, the door of the house which stood alone in an overgrown garden, was opened to her by a manservant suggesting crêpe and felt slippers. And she was led through a succession of shuttered rooms to which the arrangement of the multiple furniture lent an air of disuse to a rich and desolate apartment where Doña Maria sat alone.

The two women exchanged greetings. Twenty years divided them, but they were essentially of the same generation, for they appreciated reticence and self-control above self-expression. They were also of the same class, and conscious of it as their grandchildren would never be.

The Uruguayan sat on a high-backed chair, upholstered in red damask. She faced the sunshine which filtered between heavy curtains. Her hair and her pearls reflected faint gleams of light, but the folds of her face, supported by the stiff, black collar, were not like skin, or any other human substance.

Rigid within the casing of her thick black silk, Doña Maria waited for her visitor to speak. She knew the value of silence. Her hand, gripping the arm of her chair, was seamed and crinkled so that the veins stood out on it with the effect of cords binding an old parchment. The emerald blazed whenever the curtain moved.

Mrs. Wraxendon had also chosen a hard seat. On it she relaxed with the simplicity of complete assurance. Her hat had slipped out of place, but beneath it her forehead was unlined and her round, blue eyes were quiet. She suggested a serenity, upon which neither her own life nor anybody else's could impinge. She wore a long, loose coat of cream-coloured silk. It owed nothing to fashion, yet on Mrs. Wraxendon it acquired considerable distinction. Into the soft laces that flowed about her throat, her chin slipped in gentle curves.

So the elderly woman, who had found what she needed within herself, faced the very old lady who clung to every superficial advantage with which position and precedent had endowed her, using them as pantomime weapons against reality.

"I have brought you something . . ." said Mrs. Wraxendon, and in the fewest possible words she explained about the drought and the investigation of the well.

Doña Maria's eyes were pebbles. Her dried and darkened countenance resembled that of a very dignified toad. It had the same wrinkled immobility.

Agnes took an envelope out of her bag and from it shook out the signet-ring which bore the arms of a great family. It fell on to the table between them and lay there in a streak of sunlight. "There were

bones too," she said quietly, "but, without this, I should not have known." She looked at the older woman and moved by the courage which would not even now relinquish the vantage gained by ten years of simulation, she added, "It is only I who know."

Slowly, very slowly, Doña Maria stretched out her hand and took the ring. For a long time, she stared at the heraldic design, while her head nodded and her loose, violet lips moved without forming words.

"I remember so well," said Agnes, "the day you came to see me at the Extraordinary House. You told me of the dinner at which the Duke first saw Elena. You described his hand clenched on the table and that ring reflecting the light. I remember how you compared it to the wine which was afterwards spilled." Her voice was gently reminiscent. It encouraged, but did not insist on confidence.

There was another silence. Then Doña Maria looked up from the jewel she held. She spoke slowly, with a pause after each sentence. Her breath dragged in her throat, but her face remained expressionless. "Elena resented the effect of her beauty. It brought her too close to men—they wanted her—they beset her with their desires and she was in love with Fernando." The speaker hesitated, for she found difficulty in sifting the recollections which pressed into her mind. "So many times I saw her defending herself against men's insistence and that night when the Duke's eyes never left her, she was first impatient and then troubled. At last she made an excuse of illness so that she might put an end to it. The Spaniard leaned across the table to offer his services and his outstretched hand struck a glass. It upset. I remember Elena looked down at the wine. She would not

look at the man whose solicitude disturbed her. She went away, quickly, with Fernando."

Doña Maria's fingers closed upon the ring. Very stiff she sat in her high-backed chair.

"It was the Duke who was killed," said Agnes, as if she stated an incontestable fact.

The ageless eyes were hard as life and pride had been to a great lady whose world had passed. "He was rightly killed. For days he had importuned Elena and when she would have none of him, he waited until he knew she was alone."

Doña Maria's voice sank. She was not so much talking as exposing memories which had long been undisturbed.

Mrs. Wraxendon, listening to her account of the storm which had swept the country ten years ago, experienced familiar sensations. Then, as now, the North wind had brought insupportable heat. To escape it, Fernando and the Duke had gone, like George and Jeremy, to the Casino. While Elena, her vigilance relaxed, lay prostrate in her room, husband and potential lover gambled within a few yards of each other. Both left the rooms with the same objective and more or less at the same time, but Fernando (or was it George?) took the longer road. Consequently, by the time he reached the house, his rival had effected an entry through a window broken by the storm. The husband, coming up the stairs, heard sounds in his wife's room and as he reached the passage Elena screamed. Instinctively, he drew the campesino's knife which he always carried. . . . "And he had need of it!" continued Doña Maria in sharper tones.

Mrs. Wraxendon's attention wandered, for she was

confused between the story she now heard for the first time and the similar tale which had been told her in the middle of an unspeakably hot night, by several dismayed and startled people, who wandered about her bedroom, interrupting each other and persistently refusing to sit down.

Flinging open the door, Fernando (like George) had seen his wife struggling in the arms of a man he didn't even recognize and he'd struck before he knew what he was doing. He'd used his knife in camp fashion and killed the Spaniard with a single upward blow between the shoulder-blades. "It was an execution," concluded Doña Maria with sombre satisfaction.

Silence hung between the two women. It crept through the room and pressed heavily over the table on which lay a crumpled envelope. Agnes Wraxendon, trying to regain her usual senses in this atmosphere of tragedy and pretence, wondered what part the Indian had played in the earlier tragedy. Had she arrived too late to interfere, or did she, also, regard murder as Don Fernando's right? Then her thoughts passed to the night on which George had played the part of Elena's husband. What a strange repetition of a pattern that should have been destroyed, or was it only a reflection? In the most commonplace tones she could affect, Agnes protested, "But if killing the Duke was not only justifiable, but meritorious, why substitute Don Fernando as the victim?"

Doña Maria answered, but in a manner indicating her distaste for the subject. "Fernando had been ill. He was a man of violent temper. There had been incidents and Elena, who took the decision upon herself, was frightened lest his killing of the Duke should be considered proof of insanity. She wanted to save

him from—er—restraint, and for his freedom she was prepared to destroy her reputation."

The old voice was very gentle. The words came slowly and Agnes imagined a flag dipped. Doña Maria paid tribute to a standard as high as her own.

"Did no one guess?" asked Mrs. Wraxendon, aware of trespass.

The Uruguayan looked from the colourless calm of her visitor to the crumpled envelope which had been her passport. After a moment's reflection she said: "The family doctor knew and the Minister of Justice who was Elena's godfather. They are both dead."

The eyes of the two women met. In them was the same purpose.

Mrs. Wraxendon rose. She picked up the envelope and tore it into small pieces. "So now," she said with intention, "you are the only person who knows."

A faint sigh stirred the old woman's lips, but she did not reply. In silence she pressed the other's hand, and for a moment it seemed to Agnes, tranquil and strong, that the exquisitely arranged figure in the chair of state was a shell from which life had passed.

Then she realized that Doña Maria had accepted the complicity of silence as a right. So also had she accepted the sacrifice of Elena, for the family disposed of the individual and a life was of no account in the pattern woven from one generation to another.

Mrs. Wraxendon went out into the sunlight and ordered her chauffeur, who did not drive nearly as well as Tony, to take her to the Bank. Elena would never return. But the Extraordinary House must not pass to other tenants. Agnes was neither imaginative nor analytical, but under the influence of Doña Maria's stagecraft, she found her thoughts drifting between

such images as the firmament reflected in a puddle and the microcosm of the universe in a specimen tube. It seemed to her the house comprised within the limits of its walls the same suggestion of fundamental magnitudes. With such at her disposal, Mrs. Wraxendon decided she could dispense with 'seeing the world' as represented by Parliament Houses and penguins.